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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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Sandeshkhali incident scripted by BJP: Mamata

SURI, 18 FEB

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Sunday said that "an incident was made to happen" in Sandeshkhali and blamed it on BJP for having it scripted along with Enforcement Directorate (ED) and media. Banerjee, also Trinamool Congress supremo, said that not a single woman in Sandeshkhali has lodged any FIR and it was she who had directed police to initiate a suo motu case in this connection. BJP is trying to create disturbance in West Bengal, Chief Minister alleged while speaking at a public distribution programme organised by state government at Suri in Birbhum district. "In Bengal, if people are tortured, we take action. I am sending officers who will listen to the people and if it is found that someone has taken things from them, they will get back everything. It's my promise," Banerjee said. Referring to Emergency period of 1975-77, Banerjee stated that even Prime Minister Indira Gandhi could not win the election after putting over 2,000 people in jail.—*PTI*

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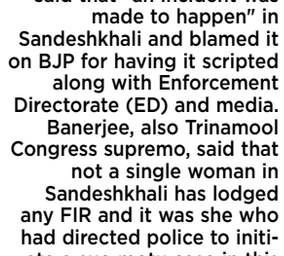

PHOTO: X

Jain seer Acharya Vidyasagar Maharaj dies

RAJNANDGAON, 18 FEB

Renowned Jain seer Acharya Vidyasagar Maharaj breathed his last on Sunday at Chandragiri Teerth in Dongargarh in Chhattisgarh's Rajnandgaon district after undertaking 'sallekhna'. Sallekhna is a Jain religious practice involving voluntary fasting unto death for spiritual purification, a statement from the teerth said. Acharya Vidyasagar Maharaj attained Samadhi through 'Sallekhna' at Chandragiri teerth at 2.35 am, the statement said. "Maharaj was staying on the teerth in Dongargarh for the last six months and was unwell from the last few days. For the last three days, he was observing sallekhna, a religious practice of voluntarily fasting to death, and had quit intake of food and liquids. According to Jainism, it is a vow taken for spiritual purification," the statement said. A procession will be taken out at 1 pm on Sunday for people to pay tribute to the departed seer and the final rites will be held in Chandragiri teerth, it added.—*PTI*

Opposition lacks road map for 'Viksit Bharat', says Modi

PM said he is seeking power not for 'satta bhog' but for country's benefit

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted on Sunday that BJP's return to power with a strong mandate is the first condition for India to realise its big goals as he exhorted thousands of party members to work with renewed energy, vigour and enthusiasm for the next 100 days to ensure a big victory.

Addressing nearly 11,500 BJP delegates from across the country at Bharat Mandapam here, he said he is seeking power not for "satta bhog" (enjoying power) but for the country's benefit, and slammed the opposition, especially the Congress, saying they make all kinds of false promises but lack a road map for making the country developed. This is something only BJP can do, he said, exuding confidence about his return to power while noting that many foreign countries have invited him for engagements in July, August and September. This suggests that these countries also know that "aayega toh Modi hi" (Modi's re-election is inevitable).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi being garlanded by Union Home Minister Amit Shah, BJP National President JP Nadda and others, in New Delhi on Sunday *PHOTO: PTI*

Modi stuck to the message of the country's growth and rising global standing besides his government's measures for empowering every section of society, especially the poor.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president J.P. Nadda's term in that post has been extended to June 2024, with the party now poised to face the next General Elections with him at the helm.

He asked BJP members to connect with all sections of society, including those who have not been inclined to the party, saying they have to earn the trust of everyone. When everyone makes an effort, then the BJP will win more than 370 seats and the NDA led by it 400-plus seats in the 543-member House, he said.

"We have to connect with everyone, not for forming government but to build the country," he said. Taking an aim at critics who wondered if he would be able to handle foreign policy, he said India's ties with West Asia is at its strongest and noted that he was the first prime minister in a few decades to visit the UAE. Congress used to look at West Asia through the prism of Pakistan, he said.

Five Arab countries have bestowed their highest honours on him.

Modi said the nation no longer thinks and dreams small. It now has big dreams and has taken big resolutions to make India a developed country by 2047, he added.

He said Congress is riven by internal divisions not due to ideological differences but over its stand on him as one section believes in tarnishing his image by all means, including personal attacks, while another wants to avoid this approach.

He said 10 years of unblemished governance and pulling 25 crore people out of poverty were no ordinary feats. "If I had thought of my home, it would not have been possible to build homes for crores of people," he said. —*PTI*

BJP passes resolution on Ram temple

New Delhi, 18 Feb

BJP's national convention on Sunday passed a resolution on the Ram temple in Ayodhya, asserting that this heralds the establishment of "Ram Rajya" in India for the next 1,000 years. "The construction of a grand and divine temple of Lord Shri Ram at his birthplace in the ancient holy city of Ayodhya is a historic and glorious achievement for the country," the resolution said. This convention heartily congratulates the leadership of the prime minister, it said. —*PTI*

'DELHI CHALO' MARCH

Centre holds 4th round of talks with farmers

The government has asked for some time and said that it will discuss the matter with the union ministers *PHOTO: PTI*

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

- Farmers from Punjab began their march to the national capital on Tuesday but were stopped by security personnel at the Shambhu and Khanauri border points between Punjab and Haryana

As the farmer protest at the Shambhu border enters the sixth day, Punjab Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee leaders said on Sunday that the government had asked for some time to discuss the matter with the union ministers.

"It is our sixth day at the Shambhu border. Today we are also holding fourth round of talks with the government. The government has asked for some time and said that it will discuss the matter with the union ministers and find a solution to it," the committee's general secretary Sarvan Singh Pandher said on Sunday.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (non-political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha have given a "Delhi Chalo" call to press the BJP-led Centre to accept their demands. Farmers from Punjab began their march to the national capital on Tuesday but were stopped by security personnel at the Shambhu and Khanauri border points between Punjab and Haryana.

The protesting farmers have been camping at the Shambhu border near Ambala since the start of the march on Tuesday, 13 February. Talks between the union ministers and leaders of various farmers' bodies remained inconclusive, with the fourth round of talks scheduled on Sunday.

"This was the third meeting between the farmers and the government. Several issues and topics were raised and discussed. We will surely reach a conclusion if we will carry forward the talks peacefully. I am hopeful that we will soon find a solution. Another meeting with the farmers will be held on Sunday. We will discuss things in that meeting and will find a solution," the Union Minister had said.

Union Agriculture Minister Arjun Munda asserted that while making the decision, they have to keep in mind all the aspects of it. "The decision cannot be taken in such a way that people criticize the situation without thinking and understanding in the coming days. Rather, we should try to keep in mind all the aspects of it and discuss it. The common life of the people should not be troubled in any way," he added.

Meanwhile, the security forces deployed at the Shambhu Border continue to hold resistance to the agitating farmers attempting to enter the national capital. —*ANI*

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Bag explodes at Shivamogga town bus stop, 1 injured

SHIVAMOGGA, 18 FEB

- The incident unfolded when Umesh and Rupa, a couple from Haveri district, approached Antony Das's shop and left a bag before moving on to another shop

An explosion near Shiralakoppa bus stand this afternoon left Antony Das, 50, a bed sheet dealer, injured.

The incident unfolded when Umesh and Rupa, a couple from Haveri district, approached Antony Das's shop and left a bag before moving on to another shop. Later, the bag exploded, causing injuries to Antony Das's leg and hand due to the blast's intensity. He was swiftly rushed to the Shiralakoppa Govern ment Hospital for medical attention.

Police detained Umesh for questioning, revealing that the bag contained explosives intended for wild boar. Superintendent of Police, Mithun Kumar, visited the scene for inspection, and a case has been registered at Shiralakoppa police station, with ongoing investigations.

Speaking about the incident, Antony Das stated, "I am involved in the bed sheet business and set up a shop in Shiralakoppa. Two unknown individuals approached us, purchased bed sheets, and left a bag resembling a handbag, assuring us they would return soon. Unaware of its contents, my foot inadvertently touched the bag, triggering the explosion, and resulting in injuries to my legs and hands. Others suffered minor injuries from shrapnel. The explosion occurred suddenly, leaving us stunned. I demand a thorough investigation into this matter."

Umesh and Rupa, who work in a coffee plantation in Chikmagalur, had stored similar explosives to deter wild animals. Further inquiries are underway. —*Salar News*

PROBE ON

3 dead, 5 injured in Kengeri perfume storage unit fire

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Two fire engines rushed to the spot and doused the fire *PHOTO: SALAR*

Three people were found dead and many were trapped in a perfume storage unit in Ramasandra in Kengeri after an accidental fire broke out on Sunday evening. The dead bodies have been shifted to RR Nagar Hospital for post mortem, said the fire official present at the spot. The residents around the unit ran out of their homes after they heard an explosion and immediately alerted the fire control room and police. Two fire engines rushed to the spot and doused the fire. Five people working in the unit sustained severe burn injuries and were admitted to a nearby hospital. Senior police officials, fire officials and BBMP officers supervised the rescue operation. —*Salar Newsv*

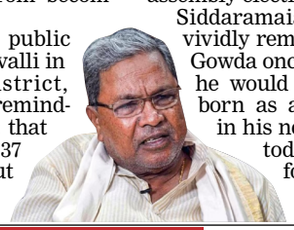
JD(S) allied with BJP as MLAs were ready to quit: CM

MANDYA, 18 FEB

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Sunday said that former Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda felt compelled to form an alliance between JD(S) and BJP because many of his MLAs were ready to quit the party.

He said a "drama" was played by JD(S) patriarch to prevent JD(S) from becoming "zero".

Addressing a public meeting at Malavalli in Mandya district, Siddaramaiah reminded the audience that JD(S) had won 37 seats in 2018 but lost 18 seats in 2023 when it won only 19 seats in the assembly elections.



Siddaramaiah said he vividly remembers Deve Gowda once saying that he would prefer to be born as a 'Musalman' in his next birth, but today he has forged an alliance with BJP. "I pray to you with folded hands, please remove the word 'secular' from your party Janata Dal (Secular). You have no moral right to use the word 'secular' anymore after allying with the communal BJP," he said, targeting his remarks at JD(S). He appealed to the people of Mandya to vote for Congress as it fulfilled all the five key guarantees including 'Shakti' scheme offering free bus rides to Karnataka women in non-luxury government buses anywhere in the state. So far women in Karnataka have taken up 155 crore rides, he told people. —*PTI*

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Bannerghatta Park set for leopard safari

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Bannerghatta Biological Park (BBP) in Bengaluru is all set to launch its highly anticipated leopard safari soon. With the green light from the authorities, the park is working diligently to prepare for this thrilling addition. Officials are aiming to open the safari to the public within a month and a half.

AV Surya Sen, the Chief Executive Officer of BBP, told **Salar News**, "We have designed a 49 acre enclosure for the leopards. High-rise mesh and strategically placed fences address their agility and potential escape attempts, prioritising the safety of both animals and visitors. The launch timeline depends on the successful socialisation and training of the leopards."The development adds another dimension to BBP's already diverse wildlife offerings. Visitors, especially nature enthusiasts and families, can soon witness leopards in a well-curated environment. Sen said, "We plan to release 13 leopards, all of which are hand raised by experts from when they were two month old cubs, and all the leopards kept are below one and a half year old. We are training them to get used to the tourist buses and safari jeeps." —*Salar News*

BADMINTON ASIA C'SHIPS

INDIAN WOMEN CLINCH GOLD

SHAH ALAM,18 FEB

Anmol Kharb yet again performed when it mattered, winning the decisive fifth rubber to lead the Indian women to a historic Badminton Asia Team Championships title with a tight 3-2 victory over a depleted Thailand, here Sunday.

The young sprightly group of Indian women's team, led by seasoned PV Sindhu, defied all expectations to come up trumps against two-time bronze medallists Thailand.

"I'm very happy that we bagged the gold medal because this is the first time India are winning the gold at the Badminton Asia Team Championships," Anmol said after the match.

Indian women team celebrates after winning the tournament with a 3-2 victory over Thailand in Selangor, Malaysia, Sunday *PHOTO: PTI*

"It is a big thing because history has been scripted here. Yesterday (after the semifinal win) it went crazy in India because beating powerhouses like Japan and China was such a big thing. Today, it will be full-on celebration in India and in the team as well.

"I wanted to play my 100 per cent but there was no pressure on me at all. We were confident of winning the fifth match."

It is the first-ever major title for Indian women in team championships and provides a big boost to the side ahead of the Uber Cup, which is set to be held in Chengdu, China from 28 April to 5 May.

India had won two medals in the past with the men's team claiming bronze medals in the 2016 and 2020 editions. Thailand were without their top two singles players -- world No. 13 Ratchanok Intanon and Pornpawee Chochuwong, who is ranked 16th in the world. Two-time Olympic medallist Sindhu provided India a confident start, riding on her power and placement to outclass world number 17 Supanida Katethong 21-12, 21-12 in the first singles and hand India a 1-0 lead. —*PTI*

'Telecom towers in PoK upped to aid terrorists'

JAMMU, 18 FEB

Number of telecom towers along the Line of Control in Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir (PoK) has been increased in recent times with an aim to aid terrorists and their associates in infiltration activities, officials said here. Terror groups have been using highly encrypted YSMS services, a technology that merges smart-phones and radio sets for covert communication purposes, the officials said after a study of the pattern of infiltration bids and recent terror attacks, particularly in the south of the Pir Panjal range in the Jammu region.

With this technology, a handler of a terror outfit in PoK is connected with the infiltrating group and its reception party in the Jammu region on a telecom network used across the LoC. This is done to avoid detection by the army or the BSF, which guard the borders with Pakistan. Project for boosting telecom signals has been completely handed over to the Special Communication Organisation (SCO) led by Pakistani army officer Maj Gen Umar Ahmad Shah, believed to be formerly working with Pakistan's spy agency ISI. The strategic placement of telecom towers near the LoC and the international border, generally used for aiding terrorists and their associates in infiltration activities, stands in violation of Article 45 of the constitution of the International Tele communication Union (ITU), a body under the United Nations. —*PTI*

2 killed, 5 hurt in car-bus collision in Raichur

RAICHUR, 18 FEB

Two women were killed on the spot and five others were grievously injured in a car accident. The car they were travelling in collided with a bus on Sunday on the outskirts of the district headquarter town of Raichur. According to police, the accident took place near Seventh Mile Cross in Raichur. The injured were admitted to Raichur Institute of Medical Science (RIMS) Hospital and a private hospital. A case was registered and investigation is on.—*PTI*

Gold worth ₹45.44 lakh seized at MIA

MANGALURU, 18 FEB

Customs officials at Mangaluru International Airport (MIA) made a significant seizure when they confiscated 733gm of gold valued at Rs 45, 44,600. The gold, in paste form, was discovered concealed inside a black-coloured pouch hidden within the drainage chamber of a washroom in the immigration arrival area, a Customs release said. The identity of the individual responsible for stashing the gold in the washroom remains unknown. Customs authorities have initiated further investigation into the matter to ascertain the source and intended recipient of the smuggled gold. —*PTI*

CRIME BEAT

Husband held for stabbing wife over argument

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

A man, Jayaprakash, 32, was arrested on Sunday for allegedly stabbing his wife Divyasree, 26, during a domestic dispute. The incident occurred at 9am on 15 February, near Sollapuradamma temple in Sunkadakatte.According to police reports, the couple, who married in 2019 against their families' wishes, had a history of arguments. Jayaprakash reportedly doubted his wife's fidelity and frequently accused her of having affairs. Sub-inspector of Kamakshipalya police station told Salar News, "This latest argument had occurred when Jayaprakash's sister had refused to get engaged, which enraged him. During the argument, he attacked Divyasree with a knife, injuring her leg. They have had arguments in the past, but nothing escalated to this extent. We have the accused in our custody and will further interrogate him." Divyasree is currently receiving medical attention and eight stitches were applied to her wound. FIR has been registered at Kamakshipalya Police Station, and Jayaprakash has been taken into custody.—***Salar News***

Foreign national held for prostitution in City

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Bengaluru Cyber Crime Branch's (CCB) Mahila Samrakshan Dal wing raided near Kudlu Gate in Electronic City on Sunday, resulting in the arrest of one foreign woman for alleged involvement in prostitution. Currently, City police are scrutinising the documents of the foreign nationals and their past criminal history in the case. Three other foreign women were rescued by CCB. According to the press release by Bengaluru Commissioner it stated that this raid comes after a related incident in January, when the City police arrested nine individuals, including a 40-year-old Turkish woman, for running a prostitution racket via 'Bengaluru Dating Club' group on Telegram and WhatsApp. Following a tip-off, Ulsoor and Baiyappanahalli police initiated an investigation into Telegram group, where the racket was operating under the guise of a dating club. Police arrested the gang members in a room at Leela Park Hotel in Domlur. —***Salar News***

Congress will win at least 20 seats in Lok Sabha polls: CM

Siddaramaiah said JD(S) allied with BJP as they were sure of defeat

MANDYA, 18 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Sunday asserted that the Congress will win at least 20 out of 28 seats from the State in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Speaking to reporters at Malavalli in Mandya district he said, "We are preparing to win at least 20 seats this time. BJP is making exaggerated claims that they will win all the 28 seats because they have realised that people will bless Congress this time."

Regarding the Congress strategy to fight against the coalition of BJP and Janata Dal (Secular), Siddaramaiah said, "This time we have only one Opposition. There are no two parties but only one party in the Opposition. JD(S) has merged with the BJP and is not functioning like a separate party."

He attacked BJP and JD(S) alliance in the State and said JD(S) entered the alliance because they know they cannot win.

"JDS which claims to be a secular party has joined hands with a casteist party," he said. He also said that JD(S) has lost moral rights to have 'secular' in their party's name as they have now tied up with BJP. "HD Deve Gowda once said he likes to be born as a Muslim in his next life and now they have united with BJP. They have no moral rights to call themselves secular". Questioning the contribution of JD(S) and BJP to the State he said, "What is the contribution of JDS and BJP to the state? BJP is synonymous with a party of lies. There is no prime minister in independent India who lies as much as Modi."

To a question on fielding sitting ministers in the general elections, he said whoever the local MLAs and district level party office bearers recommend will be fielded.In his speech he said that Congress workers of Mandya are ordered to ask for votes based on the performance of the government and not on lies like other parties. He said government fulfilled all the guarantees within eight months of coming to power. He attacked the central government for not giving rice grains to the State government for the Anna Bhagya scheme.

—*Salar News with Agencies*

Siddaramaiah said workers are ordered to ask for votes based on the performance of the government ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

SC to hear CM's plea seeking quashing of FIR

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Supreme Court is scheduled to hear Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's petition against the high court order dismissing his plea to quash an FIR lodged against him and others in 2022 in relation to a protest march.

A bench of Justices Hrishikesh Roy and Prashant Kumar Mishra is likely to hear the plea of the Congress leader.He has challenged the 6 February order of the high court that imposed a fine of Rs 10,000 on him as well as Congress general Secretary and State in-charge Randeep Singh Surjewala, State Ministers MB Patil and Ramalinga Reddy, and directed him to appear before a special court on 6 March.The case was registered against the Congress leaders after they took out a march to lay siege to the then chief minister Basavaraj Bommai's residence in Bengaluru, demanding the resignation of KS Eshwarappa, who was the rural development and panchayat raj minister in the southern state at the time.The agitation was staged after a contractor, Santosh Patil, died by suicide accusing Eshwarappa of demanding 40 per cent commission on a public work in his village.

According to police, the case pertained to blocking roads and causing inconvenience to commuters. Stating that none of the "quintessential" ingredients of the offences alleged was made out, he has said in his plea that the proceedings are an abuse of the process of law and will lead to undue harassment.

—*PTI*

Supreme Court ***PHOTO: PTI***

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar interacts with people during Janaspandana programme at Jnanabharati in Bengaluru on Sunday ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

'Flyovers on Metro lines will decongest City'

- Shivakumar further said that the guarantee schemes of the Congress government reached about 95 per cent of the people

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Sunday said that the government plans to build flyovers along certain stretches of Namma Metro lines to decongest Bengaluru City.

Speaking at the mass grievance redressal 'Government at Your Doorstep' at Jnanabharathi, he said, "It has been decided to build flyovers on certain stretches of metro lines to decongest the traffic. A proposal has been sent to the Centre regarding this."

He added, "Chief Minister announced many projects in the Budget to develop Bengaluru. The BBMP (Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike) Budget will be presented soon and it will complement the projects announced in the State budget. We are preparing a feasibility report for tunnel roads near Yeshwantpur, Sumanahalli, Goragunte palya, etc." He further said that the guarantee schemes of the Congress government reached about 95 per cent of the people. He also called for regaining the rich banking legacy of Karnataka which has disappeared due to the recent bank mergers.

City's drinking water issue

On the drinking water issue in the City, he assured that it would be resolved by the end of the May.

He said that MLA ST Somashekar had requested solution for drinking water in 110 villages around Bengaluru City. He also addressed the issue of increasing depths of borewells assuring to have a discussion with Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) officials on the same.

"Bengaluru City will get an additional 6.5 TMC of water and it will reach the beneficiaries by May," he said. "Several localities in Bengaluru are suffering from drinking water storage and are highly dependent on tankers. We are fighting for the Mekedatu project to resolve the water problems of Bengaluru," he said.Later speaking at the centenary celebrations of Karnataka Bank here, he released Rs 100 coin and a stamp to commemorate the centenary celebrations.

People at the grievance programme

More than 3,000 people submitted their pleas on Sunday.

Gangamma, a house help, said, "For people like us with low income Rs 2000 and free electricity means a lot. We are happy that our problems are being noticed but despite the applications, we are not able to get the benefits." Manjunath, 24, requested Shivakumar for a house. "I do not have a permanent job, I have been seeking a government job under disability quota but there has been no development so far. At least if I get a housing facility it would reduce the burden of rent," he said. —*Salar News*

Sumalatha hints at Mandya LS run again

MANDYA, 18 FEB

Actress-turned-politician Sumalatha Ambareesh has strongly hinted at her intention to contest the upcoming Lok Sabha elections from Mandya constituency. The announcement came during a grand celebration commemorating actor Darshan's 25-year milestone in the film industry, held at Srirangapatna on Saturday.

During the event, Sumalatha expressed her deep emotional connection to Mandya and reaffirmed her commitment to the constituency. Recalling her candidature in the 2019 elections, she shared heartfelt gratitude towards the Mandya people for their unwavering support.

Sumalatha reminisced about the encouragement she received from Darshan and fellow actor Yash during her previous electoral campaign, indicating confidence in their continued backing.

—*Salar News*

Sumalatha ***PHOTO: SALAR***

SURYA NAMASKAR

Mass Surya Namaskar programme held at Vidhana Soudha organised by Department of Ayush, aiming to create awareness on health and fitness. Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao participated in the event, in Bengaluru on Sunday ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

The colony lacks basic amenities such as electricity, water and sanitation facilities ***PHOTO: SALAR***

New water drums for migrants' colony

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

A migrant workers' colony in Mallathahalli, received a donation of water drums, providing essential support to approximately 25-40 families residing in the area.

Four individuals from the City stepped forward to donate water drums, aiming to improve the living conditions in the colonies. As part of their initiative called "Mere Hisse ki Khushi", Abhishek Singh, who is actively involved in daily food donations for the migrant workers in the City, recognised the harm caused by the contaminated water containers and addressed this issue. The nearest water source for is located at least 800 metres to 1km away, requiring them to transport water in bucket-like containers. The colony hosts atleast 100 migrant labourers who work for BBMP projects and few of them as house maids, who hails from Uttar Karnataka. They lack basic amenities such as electricity, and sanitation facilities. —*Salar News*

INVESTIGATION OFFICER APPOINTED IN ST. GEROSA CASE

MANGALURU, 18 FEB

Senior IAS officer and additional commissioner of the education department in Kalaburagi Akash has been appointed as the investigation officer to probe the incident at St Gerosa school where a teacher has been accused of making offensive remarks against Hindu religion.

The officer will undertake a thorough probe into the incident as well as the developments aftermath and submit his report to the government, Dakshina Kannada district-in-charge Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao told reporters here on Saturday.Describing the incidents at the school as 'unfortunate', Rao said the investigation will bring out the truth about the allegations and subsequent protests.

The incident came to light when two audio messages via social media went viral accusing English teacher, Sister Prabha, of making ofensive remarks against Hindu religious practices and political leaders during a class.

As the social media messages spread, four parents approached the headmistress who assured them a thorough investigation to bring out the truth.Later when the issue escalated, the school management removed the teacher from the post, pending an inquiry, to maintain law and order and ensure the safety of the student community.

—*PTI*

Ready-made khichdi mix removed from mid-day meal scheme

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

In response to the criticism surrounding the provision of ready-mix mid-day meals to anganwadi workers across the State, the Women and Child Development Department (WCD) has opted to discontinue the distribution of the packed food.

Instead, they have resolved to supply fresh food materials like before. This decision comes amidst concerns raised by anganwadi workers regarding the quality and nutritional value of the ready-mix meals.Varalakshmi, State President of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, which oversees anganwadi workers, stated that in a meeting with the Women and Child Department, it was decided to halt the production of the khichdi mix and replace it with rice and vegetable sambar.On 12 February, **Salar News** reported regarding the ready-mix mid-day meals, citing complaints from students about vomiting, stomach aches, and foul smells upon opening the packs and on its unhealthy nutrients.

Earlier, Supreme Court and High Court have issued directives to both the union and State governments to ensure that anganwadi children receive nutritious food. In compliance with this, the Union government introduced the Poshan 2.0, which mandates the provision of 500 calories of energy and 12-15 grams of protein per day for each child.

Speaking to **Salar News**, Vijaylakshmi, an anganwadi worker expressed concern over the lack of clarity regarding the provision of other essential foods. She highlighted the challenge of managing maintenance expenses from their own pockets and urged authorities to prioritise sending fresh food supplies soon. —*Salar News*

Packaged mid-day meals making kids sick

Packaged meals have compromised the food's nutritional content, leading to health issues in children

YASHWANT GOPALRAJ
BENGALURU, 12 FEB

After being served cooked mid-day meals for years, children in Karnataka are now being fed ready-to-mix packaged food.The change in meals has led to compromise in the food's nutritional content, leading to adverse health issues in children. Many have complained of digestive issues, vomiting, aches and nausea after consuming the meals. The bland taste of the food is also leading children to skip the meals regularly.

The State government updated its mid-day meals menu in December, replacing cooked food with processed mix. Though the State's budget allocation for mid-day meals has been increasing for the last three years, the Women and Child Department officials claim it has been reduced, due to 1/6th grains claiming they have now, students express disappointment and say 'my battoo, idli (sooji khaliyida) is not as soft as cook the white water ingredients'.

Meanwhile, Lakshmi, an anganwadi cook from the City, said now it takes only green leafy vegetables, how can the food taste good? They have provided us with a list of what we are to do with it," she said. She also claims the ready-mix pack has a foul smell when opened.

Budget allocation for mid-day meals
2022-2023 ₹960 crore
2021-2022 ₹790 crore
From 2020-2021 ₹315 crore
Source: PRS legislative research

THE PACKAGED FOOD
Protein powder
Readymade kichdi rice and masala
Millet laddoo powder
Sambar masala
PLIGHT OF ANGANWADI WORKERS

MEALS THEN AND NOW

Time	Menu Before	Menu now
10.30 am	Cow's milk	Milk powder or protein mix
1.30 pm	Rice with dal or vegetable sambar and kara pongal	Ready-mix kichdi and Sambar Ingredients: Vegetables, sprouts, oil, coriander leaves, dal, chilli powder, salt, sugar, egg and chikki Ingredients: ready-made sambar powder, milk powder dal, salt kichdi mix
3.30 pm	Sprouts masala with green grams, black chickpea	None
Saturday special	Chikki and lemon rice	Chikki with only limited anganwadi centre. The rest is replaced with

SALAR EXCLUSIVE

State government updated mid-day meals menu in December, replacing cooked food with processed mix. PHOTO:PTI

On 12 February, Salar News reported about ready-mix mid-day meals and students complaining about health issues ***PHOTO: SALAR***

Devotees flock to Ayodhya from Mysuru

MYSURU, 18 FEB

Ayodhya Sri Ram Mandir Darshan Abhiyan, aimed at facilitating devotees' pilgrimage to Darshan of Lord Balarama at Ram Mandir, in Ayodhya has garnered momentum across the nation.

Arun Yogiraj, the sculptor behind the magnificent Balarama idol, led way as devotees boarded the train from Mysore railway station bound for the sacred destination on Sunday. Among them were 1,400 devotees hailing from Mysuru, Chamarajanagar, and Kodagu regions, fervently eager for the divine darshan.

Jagdish Hiremani, a former member of the National Safai Karmachari Commission, highlighted the government's efforts in facilitating this mass pilgrimage, revealing that central government has organised a system to transport approximately 75,000 devotees daily by train for the auspicious darshan of Lord Balarama.

—*Salar News*

PHOTO: SALAR

KUKKARAHALLI LAKE

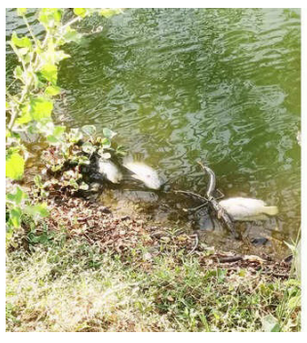
Fish found dead in lake, probe ordered

MYSURU, 18 FEB

Kukkarahalli lake, which is a popular tourist spot known for its serene ambience, faced a distressing sight on Saturday as visitors observed fish floating lifelessly in its waters.

People alerted officials from Mysuru University Horticulture Department. Director of Horticulture Mujawar swiftly mobilised his team to the scene, where they collaborated with local fishermen to remove the deceased fish from the lake. Initial estimates suggest that approximately 50 to 60 fish succumbed to unknown causes. Officials attributed the incident to a combination of factors, including recent fluctuations in weather conditions.While experts were promptly summoned to investigate the matter, the university authorities remain committed to identifying the precise cause of the fish mortality. Historically, Kukkarahalli Lake has grappled with pollution issues stemming from sewage contamination, adversely affecting the lake's oxygen levels and aquatic life. However, recent efforts have curbed the inflow of sewage and pollutants into the lake, offering a glimmer of hope for its ecological restoration.

Nevertheless, concerns persist regarding sewage discharge from the Mysuru-Hunsur road section, posing a persistent threat to the lake's ecosystem. Environmentalists emphasise the urgent need for measures to mitigate sewage inflow and replenish the lake with clean water to maintain optimal oxygen levels. —*Salar News*



Officials attributed the incident to a combination of factors, including recent fluctuations in weather conditions ***PHOTO: SALAR***

HD DEVE GOWDA DISCHARGED

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Former prime minister and JD(S) Supremo HD Deve Gowda,91, who was admitted to Manipial Hospital with respiratory problems was discharged on Sunday.On Thursday, false news regarding Gowda's health went viral on the internet. He later clarified on X that he had gone to the hospital for a routine check-up. Later, Dr CN Manjunath, son-in-law of Gowda and former director of Jayadeva hospital, clarified that it was an age related problem and there was nothing to worry about. Gowda earlier this month had said that due he wouldn't be contesting for the upcoming Lok Sabha Polls due to health issues.

—*Salar News*

RaGa says double engine govt means unemployment

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on 18 February attacked the BJP over the issue of unemployment in Uttar Pradesh, saying double engine government means "double blow" to the unemployed.In a post in Hindi on X, Gandhi claimed that today every third youth of Uttar Pradesh is suffering from the "disease of unemployment". "Where more than 1.5 lakh government posts are vacant, graduates, postgraduates and PhD holders are standing in line even for the posts that require minimum qualification," the former Congress chief said. "Double engine government means double blow to the unemployed!" he said. Lakhs of students have become overage after waiting for years for recruitments he said. *—PTI*

TDP leader anoints Chandrababu Naidu's cut-out with blood

VIJAYAWADA, 18 FEB

A TDP leader on Sunday anointed party chief N Chandrababu Naidu's life-size cutout with his blood to proclaim his reverence and used the opportunity to seek a ticket to contest in the next Andhra Pradesh assembly elections.B Venkateswar Rao, popularly known as Budda Venkanna, collected a unit of his own blood in a public spectacle and later anointed Naidu's cutout with it.Further, using the same blood, he wrote 'CBN (Chandrababu Naidu) zindabad, my life' on the wall of his house. "This is a demonstration of my extreme devotion to Chandrababu Naidu. This act was only to showcase our devotion and not a rebellion... Chandrababu Naidu is my God."*—PTI*

'Left not taking human-wildlife conflict seriously'

THRISSUR, 18 FEB

VD Satheesan, Kerala's Leader of Opposition, on Sunday, slammed the state government for allegedly "not taking seriously the matter of human-wildlife conflict," which saw two people lose their lives in the district of Wayanad within a week. "Human-animal conflict is increasing in Kerala. Across the forest border, the human-animal conflict is increasing. Every day wild animals come to the inhabited areas, attacking the people and destroying the crops," Satheesan said. "But unfortunately, our government is not taking this matter very seriously. Even the forest minister has not gone to the place. They have not visited the victims so far," he added. *—ANI*

M'rashtra lagging in development under Shinde govt: Aaditya

THANE, 18 FEB

Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Aaditya Thackeray on Sunday alleged Maharashtra is lagging behind other states in development under Chief Minister Eknath Shinde.He flagged the alleged lack of employment and the flight of industries to Gujarat to target the state government. Aaditya, son of Uddhav Thackeray, visited various shakhas (party branches) of Shiv Sena (UBT) in Thane city, the stronghold of CM Shinde."Unemployment is rising but industries are being shifted to Gujarat. This government is neglecting common citizens while prioritizing self-interest," he said. Aaditya mocked Shindefor his "emotional response" to certain political developments and said the latter betrayed Uddhav."Shinde is a failure as a Shiv Sainik as well as a human being. Under his leadership, Maharashtra is lagging behind in progress and development," he said.He recalled the old association of Shiv Sainiks from Thane with his grandparents Bal Thackeray and Meenatai.*—PTI*

YSRCP, TDP court BJP for alliance ahead of elections

Both parties are yet to announce a tie-up ahead of the polls

AMARAVATI, 15 FEB

Both the ruling YSRCP and its rival TDP are in touch with the BJP to explore political alliances *PHOTO: PTI*

In the run-up to the simultaneous Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in Andhra Pradesh, both the ruling YSRCP and its rival TDP are in touch with the BJP to explore political alliances, though no concrete announcement has emerged so far.

On 8 February, TDP Supremo and former chief minister N Chandrababu Naidu met senior BJP leader and Union Home Minister Amit Shah late at night in New Delhi, setting off speculation that they negotiated a possible political alliance. Both parties are yet to announce a tie-up.

A source told PTI that "TDP and BJP are forming an alliance" which could be announced in a few days' time.

Though TDP was planning to release its list of election candidates by 10 February , the source observed that it got delayed due to the alliance talks.

Following Naidu's meeting, back channel consultations are still going on with the BJP to seal the deal, the source added.

Telakapalli Ravi, a political analyst, noted that Naidu was pretty clear when he told a few journalists recently that 80 percent TDP candidates were zeroed in on, which implied that he may accommodate allies only for the rest of the Assembly and Parliamentary constituencies.

- Following Naidu's meeting, back channel consultations are still going on with the BJP to seal the deal, the source added.Telakapalli Ravi, a political analyst, noted that Naidu was pretty clear when he told that 80 percent TDP candidates were zeroed in

"...it is clear, he wants to go with BJP and without BJP it is difficult," he observed.

Jyoshna highlighted that TDP and BJP have an impressive legacy of winning elections together.

"Principles-wise we (TDP and BJP) have more or less the same line of thought, that is the reason why we could come in and out of an alliance successfully. We don't have major differences with the BJP," said Jyoshna.

TDP is already in partnership with Pawan Kalyan-led Janasena, an NDA ally from the southern state.

Recently, dissident YSRCP MP from NarasapuramLokSabha constituency, K Raghu Rama Krishna Raju, told PTI that TDP, BJP and Janasena will form an alliance to 'trounce' Chief minister and ruling YSRCP president YS Jagan Mohan Reddy.

Within hours of Naidu culminating his New Delhi visit on 9 February, Reddy rushed to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi, sparking another wave of speculation on a political alignment. *—PTI*

CONGRESS OR BJP?

Nath not leaving Cong, won't yield to ED: Digvijaya

BHOPAL, 18 FEB

Kamal Nath *PHOTO:PTI*

Amid the buzz over senior Congress leader Kamal Nath's possible switch to the BJP, his party colleague Digvijaya Singh said on Sunday that the veteran leader started his political journey from the the grand old party and he won't leave it.

Nath's character is such that he won't yield to the pressure of central agencies like ED, I-T or CBI, he said."The biggest denial of all such speculation is that Kamal Nath has still not joined the BJP or resigned from the Congress," Singh said. Nath started his political innings from Congress and won't leave the party, he asserted.Nath, a nine-time MP from Chhindwara and currently MLA from the seat, was removed as the party's state president following Congress' dismal performance in the November Assembly polls.

Around half a dozen Madhya Pradesh MLAs loyal to senior Congress leader Kamal Nath reached Delhi on Sunday amid speculation that he and his MP son Nakul Nath are set to join the ruling BJP. Three of these MLAs are from Chhindwara, while another three from the region are set to leave for Delhi, sources close to the veteran leader said. Another Nath loyalist, former state minister Vikram Verma, wrote 'Jai Shri Ram' in his X profile.— *PTI*

J'khand CM gives go-ahead for caste-based survey: Official

RANCHI, 18 FEB

Jharkhand Chief Minister Champai Soren has ordered a draft for the survey *PHOTO: X*

Jharkhand Chief Minister Champai Soren has given the go-ahead for a caste-based survey in the state on the lines of neighbouring Bihar on Sunday.

Soren has directed the personnel department to prepare a draft (SoP for conducting the survey) and place it before the cabinet for approval.

If everything goes according to the plan, the exercise will begin after the Lok Sabha elections, the official said.

The caste survey will be conducted on the pattern of neighbouring Bihar, where data collection was conducted between 7 January and 2 October 2023. Senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, during his Jharkhand leg of 'Bharat JodoNyayYatra' in the first week of this month, also advocated for the caste census.

Gandhi had promised a nationwide caste census and the removal of the 50 per cent cap on reservation if the Opposition INDIA bloc formed the government at Centre after Lok Sabha polls. Legislators of the ruling JMM-Congress-RJD government in Jharkhand have been demanding a caste-based survey in the state. They also raised the demand several times in the state assembly.

Meanwhile, amid reports of resentment brewing among a section of Congress legislators over the induction of four party MLAs as ministers, Soren said, JMM-led alliance in Jharkhand is "strong" and there is no threat to the coalition government in the state.

Soren, who is in the national capital, will hold talks with Congress President MallikarjunKharge. State Congress president Rajesh Thakur has already reached Delhi On being asked about disgruntled Congress MLAs reaching Delhi, he said, "This is an internal matter of Congress party, they will resolve it. I have nothing to say about that." *—PTI*

Centre deactivating Aadhaar cards to stop benefits for people: Mamata

SURI 18 FEB

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Sunday alleged that central government "deactivated" Aadhaar card of people in the state before the upcoming Lok Sabha elections so that they do not get the benefits of various social welfare schemes of her government through their bank accounts.

Speaking at a public distribution programme in Birbhum district, Banerjee said that her government would continue paying the beneficiaries of the various state-run welfare schemes even if a person does not have an Aadhaar card.

"Be aware, they (BJP-led Centre) are deactivating Aadhaar cards. Several Aadhar cards have been deactivated in many districts of Bengal. They are delinking Aadhaar cards so that before polls people do not get benefits of Lakshmi Bhandar through banks, free ration," Banerjee said.

"But we will continue paying the beneficiaries of the schemes even if they have no Aadhaar card. Not a single beneficiary will be affected," she added.

She alleged that Aadhaar cards of 50 people at Jamalpur in PurbaBardhaman district and several others in Birbhum, North and South 24 Parganas as well as in North Bengal have been "delinked".

"If I get to know that they (BJP-led Centre) have a hidden agenda behind deactivating Aadhaar cards, I will not allow a single scheme to be linked with those documents," she said.

Banerjee also directed Chief Secretary to launch an online portal where people, "whose Aadhaar cards have been deactivated", could lodge their complaints.

She said that if banks don't allow transactions for customers without Aadhaar cards, cooperative banks can be an alternative. *—PTI*

FARMERS' PROTEST

Internet suspension extended in Punjab

CHANDIGARH, 18 FEB

PHOTO:PTI

The suspension of internet services has been extended in certain areas of some Punjab districts, including Patiala, Sangrur and Fatehgarh Sahib, till 24 February on the orders of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs.

Earlier, the internet services were suspended from 12 February till 16 in view of the farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' march. The Centre used its special powers under the Telegraph Act of 1885 to suspend internet services in these areas of Punjab.

"In exercise of the power conferred by section 7 of Indian Telegraph Act, 1885 read with Sub-rule 1 of Rule 2 of the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules 2017, and in the interest of maintaining public safety and averting public emergency, it is necessary and expedient to order, the temporary suspension of internet services from 00:00 Hrs on February 17, 2024 to 23:59 Hrs on 24February, 2024 in the following areas," the order read.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann had raised the issue regarding the suspension of internet services at select areas during the 15 February meeting between three Union ministers and farmer leaders in Chandigarh.

The Haryana government has suspended mobile internet services and bulk SMS in Ambala, Kurukshetra, Kaithal, Jind, Hisar, Fatehabad and Sirsa districts.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha are spearheading the 'Delhi Chalo' agitation to put pressure on the Centre over their demands, including a law on minimum support price for crops and loan waivers. *—PTI*

The meeting comes amid farmers staying put at the Shambhu border *PHOTO: PTI*

Stop dilly-dally: Farmers to govt

CHANDIGARH, 18 FEB

The central government should not dilly-dally and accept the demands of farmers before the model code of conduct comes into force, farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal said ahead of a meeting with a panel of Union ministers here on Sunday.

Three Union ministers and farmer leaders will meet here at 6pm to discuss their demands, including a legal guarantee for MSP for crops and farm debt waiver.

The meeting comes amid thousands of farmers staying put at the Shambhu and Khanauri points of the Punjab-Haryana border with layers of barricades and a large number of security personnel halting their protest march to the national capital.

The two sides -- ministers and farmer leaders -- had met earlier on 8, 12 and 15February but talks remained inconclusive.

"We want to tell the government that it should avoid the policy of dilly-dallying," Dallewal told reporters at the Shambhu border point.

If the government thinks it will continue to hold meetings till the code of conduct is imposed, and then say it cannot do anything as the code is in force"...farmers are not going to return", he said. *—PTI*

Sandeshkhali: RJD leader Jha slams BJP leader Kailash over his remarks

KOLKATA, 18 FEB

Manoj Jha *PHOTO:PTI*

Hitting back at BJP leader Kailash Vijayvargiya over his remarks that the events in West Bengal's Sandeshkhali not only goes to show the declining law and order but also the lack of respect for women in the state, RJD leader and Lok Sabha MP Manoj Jha, on Sunday, said such incidents were 'shameful' regardless of whether they were happening in a BJP or an Opposition-ruled state.

"While baring the alarming state of law and order in Bengal, the incidents of Sandeshkhali in Bengal's North 24 Parganas district, have also brought to light the general state of apathy and lack of respect for women in the state", said Vijayvargiya

In response to his remarks, Jha said, "While acknowledging that the events in Sandeshkhali are reprehensible, I doubt if KailashVargiya-ji would have made such remarks had it been a BJP-ruled state.

The reason why he made such a statement is because these incidents took place in Bengal.

Meanwhile, BJP state president Sukanta Majumdar, who fell unconscious during a scuffle between BJP protesters and police in Sandeshkhali, termed the incidents in Sandeshkhali as 'shameful' while also voicing concern over reports of women being allegedly coerced into submitting tom excesses and atrocities to avail benefits of government schemes. *—PTI/ANI*

OFFICIALS CLAIM

'UNLF(P) involved in Manipur violence despite ceasefire'

NEW DELHI/ IMPHAL, 18 FEB

Based on the ground reports, security agencies have observed the UNLF (P) have been engaging in violent activities *PHOTO: PTI*

Security agencies have voiced concerns over the escalating violence in Manipur perpetrated by the banned United National Liberation Front (UNLF) despite the armed group signing a ceasefire agreement with the Union government last November, officials said on Sunday.

Led by KhPambei, the UNLF (P) became on 29 November, 2023 the first Meitei armed group in the Imphal Valley to enter into a ceasefire agreement with the government and agreed to renounce violence.

However, officials said the group has failed to disclose the number of its cadres who were supposed to be kept in a secure area, and they have not surrendered their weapons either.

Reports also indicate the group's members have been setting up camps in the outskirts of areas predominantly inhabited by the Kuki population with an aim to target the tribal, the officials said. They said that based on the ground reports, security agencies have observed the UNLF (P) cadres have been engaging in violent activities against both security forces and the general public.

- Security agencies have voiced concerns over the escalating violence in Manipur perpetrated by the banned United National Liberation Front (UNLF) despite the armed group signing a ceasefire agreement with the Union government last November, officials said on Sunday

Following this incident, the police arrested six individuals, including two UNLF cadre and the case is now likely to be transferred to the CBI for further investigation.

On 7 February, 2024, UNLF (P) cadre allegedly opened fire at Moirangpurel on vehicles heading towards Churachandpur, a district dominated by the Kuki community. The unrest escalated when reports claimed that a shooting incident in Maphou village, predominantly inhabited by the people of the Kuki ethnicity, was carried out by individuals allegedly associated with the ArambaiTenggol and UNLF (P) cadres.

These cadres of UNLF (P) were reportedly providing live updates on social media while claiming to target the Kuki community. Despite the ceasefire agreement aimed at ending hostilities between UNLF(P) and security forces, the recent incidents show that UNLF (P) cadres have been moving freely with their automatic weapons, seemingly immune to arrest by security forces. *—PTI*

Security stepped up in Kashmir ahead of PM's visit to J&K

SRINAGAR, 18 FEB

Security forces have been put on an alert in Kashmir ahead of the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Jammu on Tuesday. Police and paramilitary forces are conducting random checking of vehicles at dozens of places in the city and elsewhere. Special checking points have been set up at various places entry and exit points in Srinagar as a precautionary measure, the officials said.This will be Modi's second visit to Jammu and Kashmir during his second term in office. Modi is expected to inaugurate various development projects during his visit to Jammu which include AIIMS hospital Jammu, world's highest railway bridge over Chenab River and Devika river project in Udhampur. Modi is likely to remotely flag off the first train in Sangaldan-Baramulla rail link and also address a public rally in Jammu later in the day. *—PTI*

Odisha man killed for making obscene comments

ANGUL, 18 FEB

A man was killed in Odisha's Dhenkanal district for allegedly making obscene comments on women. The deceased was identified as Dharmananda Dehury of Kandar village. The alleged murder incident took place on Friday night and police arrested the accused, identified as Sridhar Dehury on Saturday. Prabha Tripathy, sub-divisional police officer (SDPO), Kamakhyanagar said Dharmananda, under the influence of alcohol, went to Sridhar's house on Friday evening and allegedly passed obscene comments on the women members of Sridhar's family. When Sridhar got to know about the incident he charged Dharmanada. Following a heated exchange of words between the duo, Sridhar brought an axe and hit Dharmananda on his neck, killing him on the spot. "As soon as we got information, we went to the spot and found Dharmananda was murdered. We immediately apprehended Sridhar who was at his home and brought him to the police station," the SDPO said. *—PTI*

CAF personnel hacked to death by Naxalites in Bijapur

BIJAPUR, 18 FEB

A Chhattisgarh Armed Force (CAF) personnel was hacked to death by Naxalites at a village market in Chhattisgarh's insurgency-hit Bijapur district on Sunday. The attack occurred around 9.30am in a village under Kutru police station limits, where a CAF team was deployed for security at a market. A small group of Naxalites attacked company commander Tijau Ram Bhuarya, who was leading the CAF team. Naxalites hacked Bhuarya to death with an axe before fleeing the scene. police team rushed to the spot and launched a search in the area to trace the assailants, the official said. *—PTI*

PHOTO:ANI

IAF's Chinook helicopter makes landing in Sangrur

CHANDIGARH, 18 FEB

A Chinook helicopter of the Indian Air Force made a precautionary landing following a "technical snag" in Punjab's Sangrur district on Sunday, police said.The helicopter landed on an open ground in the Dhadrian village of Longowal in Sangrur around 1pm, a police official said, adding both crew members and the helicopter were safe.

—PTI

'Triple-dip' of La Nina caused unusual air quality in North

The three consecutive years of La Niña had impacted ocean climate

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

A triple-dip La-Nina event, extended by climate change, triggered a peculiar trend in the 2022-23 winter season where air quality improved in north India while peninsular India recorded an increase in pollution levels, according to a new study released on Sunday.

The three consecutive years of La Niña conditions (2020-23) - a rare "triple-dip" phenomenon - had widespread impacts on the ocean and climate across the globe.

The study by a team of scientists led by Gufran Beig, Chair Professor, National Institute of Advanced Studies, emphasised that besides local emissions, rapidly changing climate is a significant factor affecting air quality.

Published in the Elsevier Journal, the study reveals that the air quality worsened in peninsular Indian cities in the 2022-23 winter season but improved in the northern part of India, contrary to the trends seen in recent decades.

Among the north Indian cities, Ghaziabad registered the most significant improvement with a reduction of 33 percent, followed by Rohtak (30 percent) and Noida (28 percent). Delhi, being the most critical and landlocked city, showed an improvement of around 10 percent.

On the contrary, Mumbai recorded the highest deterioration with a 30 percent increase in PM2.5 levels, followed by other peninsular Indian cities like Coimbatore (28 percent), Bengaluru (20 percent), Chennai (12 percent), etc.

Many North Indian cities almost reached the five-year-long target set under the National Clean Air Programme in no time. What caused this had been a puzzle, the researchers said.

"The winter of 2022-23 coincided with the last phase of an unusual triple-dip La Niña event, the first in the 21st century. This phenomenon, influenced by climate change, impacted the large-scale wind pattern, playing a decisive role in preventing stagnation conditions in north Indian cities and thus improving air quality," said RH Kripalani, a climate scientist at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology and co-author of the report.

"The dominance of higher northerly winds at the transport level forced an influx, along with relatively slower winds near the surface, trapping pollutants in peninsular India and increasing PM2.5 concentration. Conversely, feeble western disturbances, unique wind patterns, and the absence of rain, clouds, and faster ventilation led to a significant improvement in air quality in the north," Kripalani said.

To validate their hypothesis, the scientists used the newly developed advanced NIAS-SAFAR air quality forecasting model, which combines a chemical-transport model with an indigenously developed modern artificial intelligence algorithm. *—PTI*

The study reveals that the air quality worsened in peninsular Indian cities in the 2022-23 winter season but improved in the northern part of India **PHOTO: PTI**

- Among the north Indian cities, Ghaziabad registered the most significant improvement with a reduction of 33 percent

IN TRIPURA

Rape survivor alleges sexual abuse by judge

AGARTALA, 18 FEB

A rape survivor has alleged that she has been sexually abused by a magistrate inside his chamber in a court in Tripura.

A three-member panel headed by Dhalai District and Sessions Judge Gautam Sarkar has initiated a probe into the allegation.

The woman alleged that the incident of sexual abuse took place on 16 February when she went to the chamber of first class judicial magistrate, Kamalpur to get her statement recorded in connection with her rape.

In her complaint to the additional district and session's judge, Kamalpur, the woman stated, "I went to the chamber of the first class judicial magistrate to get my statement recorded on 16 February. When I was about to give my statement, the judge groped me. I rushed out of his chamber and informed the lawyers and my husband about the incident."

The woman's husband also lodged a separate complaint with Kamalpur Bar Association over the incident.

Acting on the survivor's complaint, District and Sessions Judge Gautam Sarkar, along with Chief Judicial Magistrate Satyajit Das, visited Kamalpur's additional district and session's judge's office to investigate the matter."The three-member panel headed by the district and sessions judge also met the members of Kamalpur Bar Association on the court premises and sought our point of view on the allegations of the woman. We placed our points before the panel," Shibendra Dasgupta, secretary of the advocate body said.

Responding to the allegation brought against the judge, Registrar General, Tripura High Court, V Pandey said, "We have not yet received any official complaint regarding the issue. Like other people of the state, I too came to know about it from the media and social media platforms. Once we receive a complaint in a proper format, we will definitely take appropriate action." *—PTI*

Human-animal conflict: RaGa reviews situation in Wayanad

WAYANAD, 18 FEB

A day after Wayanad witnessed violent protests over the deaths of three people in wild animal attacks, senior Congress leader and parliamentarian Rahul Gandhi on Sunday took stock of the situation with district officials and sought to hand over the assured compensation to the victims without much delay. Rahul Gandhi represents Wayanad in Lok Sabha.

He arrived in the constituency after abruptly xhalting his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Varanasi following intense protests by locals seeking permanent solution to the human-animal conflicts.

Gandhi pointed to the lack of facilities at Wayanad medical college and said it was a critical matter.

Gandhi added that he has written to Chief Minister and would request him again to take steps to improve the facilities at the medical college.

He also stressed on the importance of disbursing the compensations in a timely manner.

Gandhi spent over 20 minutes at Aji, 42, house, who was trampled to death by a radio-collared elephant in the Mananthavady area of Wayanad district triggering massive protests last week.

Later, he visited the residence of Paul, an eco-tourism guide of the forest department who was killed by a wild tusker near Kuruva Island on Friday and spent some time there.He also visited the house of Prajeesh who was killed in a tiger attack recently. *—ANI*

Rahul Gandhi meets family of Ajeesh, a forest watchman who was killed in an elephant attack, on Sunday **PHOTO: ANI**

PRIDE MARCH IN LUCKNOW

Members of LGBTQIA+ community participate in the Awadh Queer Pride Parade in Lucknow on Sunday **PHOTO: ANI**

RAIN LASHES J&K, COLD WAVE GRIPS REGION

UDHAMPUR, 18 FEB

Udhampur district in Jammu and Kashmir witnessed a sudden dip in temperature on Sunday as rainfall lashed the area, bringing it under the grip of a cold wave once again.

The Meteorological Department has issued an extended wet spell warning for the entire region, predicting light to moderate rain and snow across most parts of Jammu and Kashmir till Wednesday. The Weather Department has warned of an "extended wet spell" across Jammu and Kashmir until Wednesday afternoon.

They predict light to moderate rain and snow in most places, including plains and lower reaches, from 19 to 20 February.

This wet spell could lead to flash floods in hilly areas, landslides, and disruption of power and water supply. *—PTI*

Garlic prices surge: Farmers install CCTV cameras

CHHINDWARA, 18 FEB

In the wake of surging prices of garlic in Madhya Pradesh's Chhindwara, farmers have now come up with innovative measures to protect the produce by installing CCTV cameras in their fields.

The price of garlic has skyrocketed in the market, reaching an all-time high of 400 to 500 rupees per kilogram, leaving farmers in both joy and distress.

Faced with the surge in garlic prices, farmers in Badnoor are resorting to unconventional methods to protect their lucrative crops. Instances of theft prompted these farmers to install CCTV cameras in their fields."Earlier, a thief had stolen eight to 10kg of garlic from the field and was caught by the police later on, whereas, after this incident, I am protecting my field by installing CCTV cameras," he said.Rahul Deshmukh, who invested 25 lakh rupees in cultivating garlic across 13 acres has now received a huge return of nearly 1 crore rupees after selling garlic in the market.

"I had planted garlic on 13 acres of land in which I have spent a total of Rs 25 lakh, till now I have sold the crop worth Rs 1 crore, and the crops are yet to be harvested, I have used solar power in his field and also installed moving CCTV cameras for the safety of crops," Rahul Deshmukh said.

"3 cameras have been installed to monitor garlic crop grown in 4 acres," he added.

Pawan Chaudhary, another Garlic cultivator in Badnoor, spent 4 lakh rupees on his 4-acre garlic crop and reaped a profit of 6 lakh rupees.

According to the farmers, while the annual price of garlic typically reaches up to Rs 80 per kilogram, this season has seen a significant escalation, crossing Rs 300 per kilogram. Consequently, they have reaped substantial profits, marking the first instance of such a substantial increase in garlic prices. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PIXABAY

'BIG PICTURE CHAT'

EAM meets counterparts in Germany; discusses bilateral ties, global affairs

MUNICH, 18 FEB

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has met his counterparts from Saudi Arabia, Norway, Portugal, Poland and Belgium, and discussed bilateral ties and global matters like the situation in West Asia and reformed multilateralism.

Jaishankar is in Germany to attend the prestigious Munich Security Conference, which is the world's leading forum for debate on international security.

He held "a productive conversation" with his Saudi Arabian counterpart Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud on the sideline of the conference. He also met his Belgian counterpart, Hadja Lahbib.

He held a warm conversation with Friedrich Merz, Leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party in Germany.

He held another meeting with German Foreign and Security Policy Advisor Jens Plotner.He had a "big picture chat" with his Norwegian counterpart Espen Barth Eide and spoke about the imperative of reformed multilateralism and a more equitable world order.He held "a deep discussion" on Russia-Ukraine conflict with his counterpart from Poland Radosław Sikorski. The session was titled 'Vishwa Mitra: Bridging the Divide' and hosted by Observer Research Foundation, an independent global think tank. *—ANI*

NEW 'WORLD RECORD'

Autistic children swim 165km in TN

CHENNAI, 18 FEB

Having Autism Spectrum disorder (ASD) did not appear to be a setback to a motley group of children who achieved a rare feat of swimming 165km in the sea from Cuddalore to Chennai recently.

Accompanied by their trainers in boats, as a precaution, the determined 14 children aged 9 to 19 scripted history when they swam the coastal areas in a sea swimming expedition covering an unprecedented 165 kilometres from Cuddalore to Chennai in relay format over 4 days. In the process they created a "world record," Sathish Sivakumar, founder and head coach of Yadhavi Sports Academy for Special Needs, said.

"I am immensely proud of each child's resilience and determination. This sea swimming expedition by 14 children in the autism spectrum goes beyond a physical accomplishment. It is a symbol of breaking stereotypes and embracing the capabilities of every individual, regardless of neurodiversity," he said.

"Among the participants, three children swam continuously for 17km while a girl swam for 10km at a stretch. They demonstrated that their disability could not be a setback to display their ability to the world," Tamil Nadu's former Director General of Police C Sylendra Babu, who felicitated the children upon their arrival, said.The young talented swimmers were given medals and certificates in recognition of their remarkable "world record" in sea swimming expedition covering 165km, he said.

"Today, they proudly stand as testament to the power of perseverance and the ability to break barriers," Sivakumar said.The awe-inspiring journey commenced on 1 February at Silver Beach, Cuddalore, covering five districts, and it captured the hearts of onlookers as these incredible young swimmers navigated the challenging waters, showcasing not only their swimming prowess but also challenging societal perceptions about autism.The expedition concluded at Marina Beach here on 4 February and they were accorded a warm reception at the finishing point by Sylendra Babu, Yadhavi Sports Academy members, and others.The expedition aimed to highlight the potential of individuals with autism and to sensitise people on the importance of inclusivity and understanding of such people.The Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu extended its support to the expedition. The completion marked a milestone in promoting autism awareness and fostering a more inclusive society. *—PTI*

The completion marked a milestone in promoting autism awareness and fostering a more inclusive society **PHOTO: X**

14 held for cheating in UP police exam

LUCKNOW/BALLIA/GONDA , 18 FEB

Police have arrested 14 people for alleged cheating in the ongoing police constable recruitment examination in Ballia district, officials said on Sunday.

This included 11 members of three gangs, including a forest department and a health department technician, and three men allegedly posing as aspirants in the exam, they said.

Superintendent of Police of Ballia Dev Ranjan Verma said that police have busted three gangs that were allegedly trying to disrupt the ongoing police constable recruitment examination and arrested 14 people.

Among those arrested were Abhay Kumar Srivastava, a lab technician in the health department in Sultanpur district, and Fatehbahadur Rajbhar, a constable in the forest department in Katni district of Madhya Pradesh, he said.Police have also arrested three people, who were allegedly appearing for the exams in place of registered candidates.In Gonda district, police have arrested three people in connection to the constable recruitment process, including one for posing as a candidate.Kundan Kumar Chaudhary, a resident of Nalanda district of Bihar, was arrested on Saturday evening with the help of the local police at an examination centre in Nawabganj town, Gonda Superintendent of Police Vineet Jaiswal said.

SP said that a deal had been finalised between Chaudhary and the two candidates for Rs 6 lakh. *—PTI*

SURAJKUND MELA

Artists perform during a parade at the 37th Surajkund International Crafts Mela, in Faridabad. Tanzania is the partner country and Gujarat is the theme state for this year's mela. The event is a tribute to India's rich culture and heritage, showcasing the talents of the nation's artists. At least 20 countries are particpating in the event.
PHOTO: PTI

No international security without the Global South

60TH MUNICH SECURITY CONFERENCE

The focus of the conference is on current conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine but also looks at how many countries in the Global South have turned away from the West
PHOTO: X

New visions and ideas for a global world order: This is one of the slogans of the 60th Munich Security Conference (MSC). The idea is that thre shouldn't be winners or losers among the countries of the globe. Instead each state should be able to benefit from international cooperation.

That is why the conference has invited representatives from countries in the so-called Global South, that is from countries in the southern hemisphere that are not Western industrialized nations. Whether from Asia, Africa or South America, there are guests in almost all panels making their perspectives heard. Could this be a first step toward a fairer world?

For former Pakistani foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar, more participation also means more opportunities. "Earlier it used to be 60-to-80 year old white men talking hardcore security. We're still talking hardcore security but we're doing it in a way which is slightly more diverse," she says.

The perspective from another region is crucial when it comes to formulating alternative strategies, Khar argues.

This is also how Kenya's former foreign minister, Raychelle Omamo, sees it. "I think the more voices you have from all over the world, the more exciting the discussions are and the richer the solutions," she said.

Security also means climate and water

The focus of the conference is on current conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine but also looks at how many countries in the Global South have turned away from the West. Climate change and migration as a result of environmental destruction are also a global threat. They are among the most pressing issues facing the world's people and are hitting countries in the Global South harder.Security no longer means the same thing it did before, says Ambika Vishwanath. She is a co-founder and the chair of the Kubernein Initiative, a geopolitical consulting firm based in Mumbai, India. "It's no longer just about defense and military. It's also about water, food, human health, and all of that is interconnected," Vishwanath said.She argues that other topics also need to be discussed, ones that are closer to ordinary people's everyday lives. That includes things like climate change and water resources.

"If you just say I'm having the same kind of discussion but [you only] bring in more people, you are not going to have long term change, because what you are talking about hasn't actually changed," she argues. Vishwanath has been coming to the conference for over ten years and she welcomes the fact that the group of participants is increasingly diverse.

Human rights versus security policy

In order to accelerate cultural change, you have to create the space for it yourself, argues Düzen Tekkal. She is a journalist and chairwoman of the human rights organization Hawar.help, which, among other things, runs projects in Iraq and Afghanistan. She is moderating a panel on sexual violence as a weapon of war, a topic that has received little attention at the security conference in the past. "There is nothing negative in seeing the interests of the Global South represented by the Global South itself," Tekkal said. "We in the liberal West benefit from these experiences."In addition to Indian and Chinese government members, the controversial Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, who has been accused of human rights violations, is also attending. That upsets Saskia Bruysten, who founded the Yunus Social Business in Bangladesh alongside former Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus. Yunus was recently sentenced to prison in Bangladesh in what human rights activists say was a politically motivated case.

"I think it's important that representatives from the Global South are represented here, but it's also shocking that someone like Sheikh Hasina is here on stage being applauded while she puts her only Nobel Peace Prize winner, Muhammad Yunus, in prison. Dialogue is important here on site, but we also have to address human rights issues and discuss them publicly and not just applaud," says Bruysten, who sees herself representing Yunus in Munich too.

Tekkal argues human rights issues are not sufficiently integrated into the actual debates and the conference is still dominated by the military-industrial complex.This is where we should start, she says. "Experience has shown that those who supply the weapons come from the Global North, but that those they target are from the Global South. And then there is always that question: Who is responsible for those killed? Those who shoot or those who deliver [the guns]?"

—DW News

SALAR ساڵار

Story of a queen who fought dowry menace 200 yrs ago

Long before brutal tortures and harassments in the name of dowry were heard of, a visionary south Indian queen had taken the initiative to regulate dowry menace in the erstwhile princely state of Travancore, archival records have revealed.

Regent Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai questioned the practice of demanding exorbitant "varadakshina" (word used for dowry in certain communities) for marrying off women in the Brahmin community and issued a decree limiting its amount in the year 1823.

The revolutionary decision was taken by the queen who reigned Travancore (present southern Kerala) during the period 1815-29.

Historians point out that the decree assumed greater significance as she intervened into an existing social practice then and took a decision in favour of women of her country even if she had not banned dowry completely.

The over two century-old royal decree assumes significance in Kerala even now in view of increasing incidents of brutal assaults and series of dowry-related suicides of women being reported from across the state in recent years.

One such incident was that of a woman medico who ended life after her fiancée backed out from their marriage demanding more gold, luxury car and properties as dowry.

The accused doctor was arrested and released on bail later.

The queen's 19th century royal decree, now available in the State Archives, indicated that the menace was deeply rooted in this part of the country even two centuries ago.

In her historic order, Queen Parvathi Bai pointed out the plight of women in the "Namboothiri" and "potti" sections of the Brahmin community during the 19th century.

Indicating about the then social practices, she further said that as per the prevailing system in the princely state, the girls in the community should be married off within an age group of 10-14 years.

"Many of the families in the community were unable to marry their girls off as 1000-2000 fanam (a type of money) were demanded as varadakshina by the groom," she had said.

She issued stringent warning not to give or demand more than 700 'kaliyan fanam', (a kind of money) as 'varadakshina'.

Urging everyone in the community to obey the royal administration's decision, the decree also said those who violate it would be handed over to the court and punished as per the law of the country.

Interestingly, the regent queen, the younger sister of the mother of versatile Travancore King Swathi Thirumal, was the one who had appointed teachers for popularising education and published "granthas" (books) for teaching in the princely state for the first time.

Noted historian T P Sankarankutty said as there are not much historical documents available to prove the prevalence of dowry practice in Travancore, the royal decree by the regent queen is a significant one.

In this decree, it was specifically mentioned about the 'varadakshina' practice prevalent among the Brahmin community and so it can be considered as a concrete document, he said.

"Normally, the then kings and queens of the princely states would not have taken such a decision. In that sense, the royal decree has great significance," Sankarankutty, a former Head of the History Department at the University College here, told PTI.

Senior CPI (M) leader and former Health Minister K K Shailaja felt that a stringent central law and an intense campaign branding the demand and acceptance of dowry as a serious crime are essential to make at least some changes in the present social system.

The country does not lack legislations to fight dowry menace or to ensure equal treatment and justice for women but they are of no use if the attitude of the society does not change, she said.

"Passing of legislations at the Parliament or Assemblies is not enough. A mental state to imbibe their positive results should be inculcated in the minds of citizens and the society," Shailaja told PTI.

After the country attained independence and the state of Kerala came into being, a dowry prohibition act was passed in the year 1961.

In July 2004, the State Government amended the Kerala Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 by superseding the Kerala Dowry Prohibition Rules 1992.

In the wake of some dowry related deaths that had rocked the state, the LDF government, two years ago, came out with a series of measures to curb the practice of giving and accepting dowry as part of marriages.

It had amended its Dowry Prohibition rules to appoint 'dowry prohibition officers' in all 14 districts as part of taking stringent measures against the practice.

In 2021, Governor Arif Mohammed Khan observed a day-long fast urging people to root out the menace.

State police also launched campaigns like "Say No to Dowry" as part of measures against dowry atrocities on women.

—PTI

The revolutionary decision was taken by the queen Gowri Parvathi Bai who reigned Travancore during the period 1815-29
PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

LETTERS Write to us at salar@salar.news

Team of experts help people cut the social media craving

Some of the practical steps to reduce dependence on social media includes turning off notifications, removing or limiting apps that you find harmful
PHOTO: PIXABAY

Many people have compared the addictive nature of social media to cigarettes. Checking your likes, they say, is the new smoke break. Others say the unease over social media is just the next round of moral panic about new technologies.

We are a pair of researchers who investigate how social media affects the mental health of young people. More than 75 per cent of teens check their phone hourly, and half say they feel like they're addicted to their devices.

Here are some of the things they've told us: "TikTok has me in a chokehold."

"I would 1,000 per cent say I am addicted."

"I feel completely aware that it is hijacking my brain, but I can't put it down. This leaves me feeling ashamed."

Maybe you've had similar feelings yourself, no matter your age. Although it's true social technologies offer clear benefits – unlike smoking – many people still feel uncomfortable with how much time they spend online and often wonder if they're addicted.Years of investigation have led our team to this conclusion: Perhaps a better approach is to view your media consumption as a diet. Just as there are many ways to have a healthy diet, there are also a variety of ways to develop healthy and personalized social media habits.

The search for answers

A deluge of research on social media usage that began in the early 2010s shows negative impacts in areas related to body image, eating disorders and social comparison.Conversely, other studies point to the mental health benefits of social media, including social well-being, strong friendships and exposure to diverse perspectives.

Still other studies show conflicting results. In fact, inconclusive or mixed results seem to be a recurring pattern when researching this subject.

The inconsistencies in these studies highlight the very hard problem of characterizing healthy interaction between two complex systems – social media technologies and human behavioral psychology.

One issue is that the stress, anxiety and challenges to self-esteem experienced by users may vary from moment to moment, depending on what they are viewing. Consider that not all time spent on social media is equal. For example, messaging distant friends for one hour a day will likely leave you feeling more fulfilled than spending 30 minutes a day doomscrolling, which refers to an excessive amount of time consuming negative media.

"Active use" refers to social exchanges, like sending messages or posting content, while "passive use" is strictly the consumption of social media content without participation, contribution or engagement with others.

But even this distinction is too simplistic and has come under scrutiny. Some active behaviours, such as trolling on Reddit, are likely unhealthy for everyone involved. And some passive behaviours, like consuming educational videos, are beneficial.Because healthy media consumption varies considerably from person to person, our research takes a different approach and focuses on users developing personal agency with respect to their media consumption.

A four-week intervention

More than 500 college students with a wide range of social media habits have participated in our ongoing study. The students begin by reflecting on their current relationship with social media and then set goals for the changes they want to make. This might include spending less time mindlessly scrolling, curating their feed on an app or not sleeping with the phone in the bedroom.

For four weeks, participants report their success in adhering to their goals. They also reflect on their feelings and experiences through journaling and completing standard psychological surveys that capture social media addiction and other mental health outcomes.

Our initial analysis indicates that the four-week intervention significantly reduces social media addiction for those who started with problematic or clinical levels of social media addiction.

Problematic social media addiction is associated with a host of negative effects including moodiness, anxiety and an excessive amount of time and energy spent on or thinking about social media. People with clinical social media addiction levels experience those same effects but to a great degree, with their habit patterns around social media resembling that of an addict.

Those with problematic social media addiction scores at the start of the intervention showed a mean reduction of 26 per cent, and scores for participants who began with clinical social media addiction scores fell by 35 per cent. These reductions brought both groups into a healthy range of social media use by the conclusion of the intervention.At the end of the four weeks, participants reported positive changes in their relationships with social media with statements like the following:

"I feel as though my connections have strengthened with my friends because when I now communicate with them, it is to have an actual conversation, rather than to pass the time responding to Snapchats."

"I find (social media) a lot less appealing in a lot of ways and haven't really felt the urge to post something in a long time. I think I am … using it for fun or connectedness instead of distraction."

Positive change takes time

Much like any behaviour change, adopting healthier media consumption habits requires time, dedication and self-reflection. While our research focuses on college students, we believe a similar four-week process focused on agency and reflection can lead to profound improvements in overall well-being for people of all ages.

There are practical steps to reduce your dependence on social media. This includes turning off notifications, removing or limiting apps that you find harmful, curating your social media feed by unfollowing certain accounts, setting your phone to grayscale to reduce the appeal, and reserving phone-free time. If you can't eat gluten, you probably don't keep wheat-based bread in the kitchen. A truly healthy diet requires learning which foods make you feel your best and finding joy in eating certain foods in moderation. Similarly, our research shows that spending some time setting goals and engaging in self-reflection can change your relationship with social media – for the better.

Courtesy,The Conversation

PHOTO: X/ THAKSINLIVE

Former Thai prime minister released on parole

BANGKOK, 18 FEB

Thailand's convicted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has arrived at his mansion in the capital Bangkok after being released on parole. The billionaire was freed from a police hospital, where he had been serving a one-year jail sentence for corruption and abuse of power. Thaksin, 74, was detained as soon as he returned to Thailand last August from 15 years in self-imposed exile. He did not spend a single night in jail after complaining of health problems. Thaksin's original eight-year prison term was commuted to one year by Thailand's king - just days after he returned from exile. The handling of the case has led to criticism from many Thais, who say the rich and powerful are often given privileged treatment. *—BBC News*

Japan relaxes haircut rules for new troops

TOKYO, 18 FEB

New recruits to the Japanese military will be allowed to have longer hair in a bid to attract more young people, the country's defence ministry has said. The announcement comes as Japan struggles with a shortage of soldiers in the face of growing concerns about China and North Korea. Only buzz cuts were allowed for male recruits, and short hair for females. But from April, the rules will be relaxed to allow troops to have longer hair. Under the new rules, male troops will be allowed to have short back and sides with longer hair on top. Female personnel will be allowed to have longer hair - but cannot fall onto the shoulders when it is tied up while in uniform - and does not interfere with the wearing of a helmet. *—BBC News*

Army Reserve fighter mourned in Georgia after drone attack

WAYCROSS, 18 FEB

Two young citizen-soldiers who became close friends after enlisting in Army Reserve were remembered at funerals in southeast Georgia on Saturday, nearly three weeks after they died in a drone attack while deployed to Middle East. A service for 24-year-old Sgt. Kennedy Sanders was held in the packed 1,200-seat auditorium of Ware County Middle School in Waycross. Sanders' former basketball coach, Mandy Lingenfelter, remembered Sanders as a point guard for Ware County High's Lady Gators. A similar welcome marked the final homecoming for Sgt. Breonna Moffett, 23, in Savannah. Moffett's funeral at a Baptist church was scheduled for the same time Saturday as Sanders' service 100 miles away. Moffett's family requested that media not be present. *—AP*

Brazil judge issues $48M fine over deadly sinkhole

RIO, 18 FEB

A judge in Brazil has fined officials and construction companies R$240m ($48.3m; £38.3m) over the collapse of a building site in the city of São Paulo. Seven people were killed in the accident in 2007, when an enormous sinkhole suddenly opened up, swallowing pedestrians and vehicles. Workers were digging a tunnel to extend the metro system in the Pinheiros neighbourhood when the earth gave way. The judge said the collapse was due to "negligent" and "dangerous" acts. Those in charge of the construction project ignored warnings from experts, who said "urgent" support structures were needed in the tunnel, and pushed ahead with the work to gain time, Judge Marcos de Lima Porta said. The former president of São Paulo's Metrô, an engineer, and a construction inspector were among the six people and six companies ordered to pay compensation. *—BBC News*

Over 400 detained as Russia mourns death of Navalny

Alexei Navalny's team accuses Russia of 'hiding' his body

MOSCOW, 18 FEB

Over 400 people were detained in Russia while paying tribute to opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died at a remote Arctic penal colony, a prominent rights group reported.

The sudden death of Navalny, 47, was a crushing blow to many Russians, who had pinned their hopes for the future on President Vladimir Putin's fiercest foe. Navalny remained vocal in his unrelenting criticism of the Kremlin even after surviving a nerve agent poisoning and receiving multiple prison terms.

The news reverberated across the globe, and hundreds of people in dozens of Russian cities streamed to ad-hoc memorials and monuments to victims of political repressions with flowers and candles on Friday and Saturday to pay a tribute to the politician. In over a dozen cities, police detained 401 people by Saturday night, according to the OVD-Info rights group that tracks political arrests and provides legal aid.

Pictures of Russian Opposition leader Alexei Navalny placed between candles and flowers during a protest in Germany **PHOTO: PTI**

More than 200 arrests were made in St Petersburg, Russia's second largest city, the group said. Among those detained there was Grigory Mikhnov-Voitenko, a priest of the Apostolic Orthodox Church — a religious group independent of the Russian Orthodox Church — who announced plans on social media to hold a memorial service for Navalny and was arrested on Saturday morning outside his home.

He was charged with organising a rally and placed in a holding cell in a police precinct, but was later hospitalised with a stroke, OVD-Info reported. Courts in St Petersburg have ordered 42 of those detained on Friday to serve from one to six days in jail, while nine others were fined, court officials said late on Saturday. In Moscow, at least six people were ordered to serve 15 days in jail, according to OVD-Info. One person was also jailed in the southern city of Krasnodar and two more in the city of Bryansk, the group said.

Navalny's team said Saturday that the politician was "murdered" and accused the authorities of deliberately stalling the release of the body, with Navalny's mother and lawyers getting contradicting information from various institutions where they went in their quest to retrieve the body. "They're driving us around in circles and covering their tracks," Navalny's spokeswoman, Kira Yarmysh, said on Saturday.

A note handed to Navalny's mother stated that he died at 2:17 pm on Friday, according to Yarmysh. Prison officials told his mother when she arrived at the penal colony Saturday that her son had perished from "sudden death syndrome," Ivan Zhdanov, the director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, wrote on X. *—AP*

Israeli strikes kill at least 18 people in Gaza

RAFAH, 18 FEB

Israeli strikes across Gaza killed at least 18 people overnight and into Sunday, according to medics and witnesses, as the United States said it would veto another draft UN cease-fire resolution.

The US, Israel's top ally, instead hopes to broker a cease-fire agreement and hostage release between Israel and Hamas, and envisions a wider resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has pushed back, calling Hamas' demands "delusional" and rejecting US and international calls for a pathway to Palestinian statehood.

UN says raided hospital no longer functioning

The head of the World Health Organisation meanwhile said Nasser Hospital, the main medical centre serving southern Gaza, was no longer able to function after Israel raided the facility late last week.

In a post on X, formerly Twitter, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said a WHO team was not allowed to enter the hospital on Friday or Saturday "to assess the conditions of the patients and critical medical needs, despite reaching the hospital compound to deliver fuel alongside partners."

He said there are still about 200 patients in the hospital, including 20 who need urgent referrals to other hospitals.

Israel says it has arrested 70 suspected militants, including 20 who it says participated in Hamas' 7 October attack on Israel, without providing evidence. The military says it is looking for the remains of hostages inside the facility and does not target doctors or patients.

US opposes another cease-fire resolution

Algeria, the Arab representative on the UN Security Council, has circulated a draft resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire and unhindered humanitarian access, as well as rejecting the forced displacement of Palestinian civilians.

US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in a statement late Saturday that the draft resolution runs counter to Washington's own efforts to end the fighting and "will not be adopted". "It is critical that other parties give this process the best odds of succeeding, rather than push measures that put it - and the opportunity for an enduring resolution of hostilities - in jeopardy," she said.

The war has killed at least 28,858 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its records. Around 80% of Gaza's population have been driven from their homes and a quarter face starvation. *—AP*

Neighbours inspect the rubble of the Hasouna family house, which was struck by an Israeli airstrike during an operation to rescue two hostages in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip **PHOTO: PTI**

US slams Rwanda for supporting M23 rebels

KAMPALA, 18 FEB

The US has condemned Saturday Rwanda's support of the armed M23 group in eastern Congo, whose rebellion has caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, and called on the rebel group to "cease hostilities."

The US State Department in a statement strongly criticized "the worsening violence ... caused by the actions of the Rwanda-backed, US- and UN-sanctioned M23 armed group." It called on Rwanda "to immediately withdraw all Rwanda Defense Force personnel from the (Congo) and remove its surface-to-air missile systems," which it said threatened civilian lives and peacekeepers. It also urged the rebels to retreat from their current positions near two urban areas in Congo's North Kivu province.

This is likely to put pressure on Rwanda, whose government has repeatedly denied any links to the M23 group. Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi has accused Rwanda of destabilising Congo by backing the rebels. UN experts said they had "solid evidence" that members of Rwanda's armed forces were conducting operations there in support of the M23 group.

Fighting near Goma, has intensified in recent days as the rebels threatened to take over the metropolis. *—AP*

EX-YOUTUBE CEO'S SON DEAD

Former YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki's 19-year-old son Marco Troper was found dead earlier this week in his dormitory at University of California, Berkeley. Susan now serves in an advisory role to Google and Google-parent Alphabet **PHOTO: WOJCICKI/FB**

US will send $60B in aid, Joe Biden assures Zelenskyy

WASHINGTON, 18 FEB

US President Joe Biden has assured his Ukrainian counterpart that $60bn in military aid is on its way.

The measure still needs to pass a final congressional vote, but Biden told Volodymyr Zelenskyy that he was confident it would be approved. Zelenskyy had earlier made an urgent appeal for more weapons to avoid a "catastrophic" situation in Europe.

The US has blamed Ukraine's withdrawal from the battle at Avdiivka on a lack of Congressional support.

Taking Avdiivka - a gateway to the Russian-seized Donetsk regional capital in the east - is Russia's first notable gain since they seized nearby Bakhmut in May. "Ukraine's military was forced to withdraw from Avdiivka after Ukrainian soldiers had to ration ammunition due to dwindling supplies as a result of congressional inaction," a White House statement read. Earlier this week, the US Senate approved a $95bn (£75bn) foreign aid package - which includes $60bn for Ukraine - after months of political wrangling. But it still faces an uphill battle in the House of Representatives, where members of the Republican Party are divided on the measure. "Look, the Ukrainian people have fought so bravely and heroically, they've put so much on the line and the idea that now, when they're running out of ammunition, we'd walk away - I find it absurd," Mr Biden told reporters following his call with Zelenskyy on Saturday.

Joe Biden and Volodymyr Zelenskyy **PHOTO: PTI**

- The US has blamed Ukraine's withdrawal from the battle at Avdiivka on a lack of Congressional support. Taking Avdiivka - a gateway to the Russian-seized Donetsk regional capital in the east - is Russia's first notable gain since they seized nearby Bakhmut

"I find it unethical, I find it just contrary to everything we are as a country", he added. "So I'm going to fight until we get them the ammunition they need and the capacity they need to defend themselves."

The Ukrainian President also urged US lawmakers to approve the financial package. Zelenskyy has been in Germany, where he made an urgent appeal for more weapons to avoid a "catastrophic" situation in Europe. *—BBC News*

China to ramp up patrols near Taiwan's Kinmen

BANGKOK, 18 FEB

China is stepping up patrols in the waters off the coast of Taiwan's Kinmen archipelago, days after two of its fishermen drowned while being chased by the Taiwanese coast guard, which accused the boat of trespassing.

The Chinese coast guard's Fujian division will regularly monitor the waters off the southern coast of the city of Xiamen — a few kilometres from Kinmen — to strengthen maritime law enforcement, said the coast guard's spokesman, Gan Yu, in a statement Sunday.

Fishermen from Taiwan and China regularly sail that stretch of water which has seen a rise in tensions as the number of Chinese vessels — including sand dredgers and fishing boats — have notably increased in the area.

Kinmen residents have complained of both the noise and sound pollution from the vessels, as well as losses to their livelihood in fishing. The fishermen's deaths are unusual despite the level of Chinese activity in the waters near Kinmen, which is closer to China than it is to Taiwan's main island. China claims all of self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory.

- Fishermen from Taiwan and China regularly sail that stretch of water which has seen a rise in tensions as the number of Chinese vessels have notably increased in the area

On Wednesday, Taiwan's Coast Guard said two of four Chinese fishermen died after their boat capsized. It said their boat was fishing about one nautical mile away from Kinmen archipelago which Taiwan has claimed as a restricted area. The other two survivors remain in Taiwan's custody. China has issued a furious condemnation and blamed Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party for the fishermen's deaths. It also said that there was no such thing as "restricted" waters. *—AP*

DAY AFTER $355M FINE

Boos, cheers as Trump launches $399 sneakers line

WASHIGNTON, 18 FEB

Republican presidential nominee and former president Donald Trump has made an unusual stop a day after a judge ordered him to pay nearly $355m in penalties for lying about his wealth and other financial offences.

Trump on Saturday attended an event in Philadelphia that bills itself as the "Greatest Sneaker Show on Earth", where he introduced the first official Trump-branded footwear: shiny gold high shoes with an American flag on the back and a "T" badge in front, priced at $399.

Amid a mix of cheers and boos at the Sneaker Con, an event popular among kicks and streetwear collectors, the 77-year-old businessman-turned-politician said: "There's a lot of emotion in this room." He held up and showed off a pair of gold shoes and placed one on each side of his podium. "This is something that I've been talking about for 12 years, 13 years. And I think it's going to be a big success."

A new line of golden high top sneakers **PHOTO: X/ ROAMING_RN**

- Trump on Saturday attended an event in Philadelphia that bills itself as the "Greatest Sneaker Show on Earth", where he introduced the first official Trump-branded footwear: shiny gold high shoes with an American flag on the back and a "T" badge in front, priced at $399

The Never Surrender High-Tops, as described on the Get Trump Sneakers website, are being sold along with other Trump-branded shoes and Victory47 cologne and perfume for $99 a bottle. "They are for go-getters who don't know the word quit ... these kicks are for true Patriot," read the sneakers' description.

The website says it has no connection to Trump's campaign, though Trump campaign officials promoted the appearance in online posts. The unannounced launch came a day after a judge in New York ordered Trump and his company to pay a whopping $354.9m in penalties for fraudulently overstating his net worth to dupe lenders. *—Al Jazeera*

8 FEBRUARY ELECTION

PTI demands CEC, CJP resign over 'rigging'

Former Rawalpindi commissioner Liaquat Ali Chattha alleged that the candidates who were 'losing' 'were made to win' **PHOTO: ANI**

ISLAMABAD, 18 FEB

Jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's party has demanded the resignations of the Chief Election Commissioner and Chief Justice of Pakistan after a senior bureaucrat's allegations that the top election body and judiciary were involved in the poll rigging.

Former Rawalpindi Commissioner Liaquat Ali Chattha on Saturday alleged that the candidates who were "losing" the elections "were made to win" in the city. He claimed that 13 candidates from Rawalpindi were forcefully declared winners.

His remarks came amidst jailed former prime minister Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party began nationwide protests against alleged rigging and stealing of its mandate in the February 8 elections.

"I am taking responsibility for all this wrongdoing and telling you that the chief election commissioner and the chief justice are also completely involved in this," he said. Chattha resigned from his office after "accepting responsibility" for the manipulation of poll results.

A PTI spokesperson demanded that Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Sikandar Sultan Raja and Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa tender their resignations

- The spokesperson said that Chattha confessed that the victory of independent candidates leading with over 70,000 votes was converted into a defeat by putting fake stamps

following the revelations by Rawalpindi Commissioner Chattha. He said Chattha's admission endorsed PTI's stance on how the public mandate was stolen in the dark of the night, besides exposing the real characters involved in election rigging.

The spokesperson said that Chattha confessed that the victory of independent candidates leading with over 70,000 votes was converted into a defeat by putting fake stamps. He emphasised that Chattha's testimony supported PTI's stance that people had voted for PTI-affiliated independent candidates in large numbers. However, the overwhelming PTI majority was allegedly turned into a minority overnight through poll "fraud". He demanded that the electoral watchdog should promptly return PTI's 86 stolen seats in the National Assembly. He also demanded that all the elements involved in stealing public mandate should be punished under the Constitution and the law. *—PTI*

Braithwaite secures ₹180cr order to supply 500 wagons

KOLKATA, 18 FEB

Central PSU Braithwaite & Co Ltd has received an order worth Rs 180 crore to supply 500 wagons to the railways, a top company official said on Sunday. These are BCVM-C type wagons, also known as brake vans attached to rakes."We have secured an order of 500 wagons this month valued at Rs 180 crore", Braithwaite chairman and managing director Yatish Kumar told PTI. The company has been diversifying into services and construction for a sustainable turnaround and to attain high growth, as wagons were 95 per cent of the business in 2018 but now it has come down to 55 per cent.The company is striving to boost the total order pipeline, which was Rs 1,734 crore as of December 2023."We had plans to reduce it to 50 per cent. Introducing new revenue verticals was important for a sustainable turnaround with better profitability," Kumar said."Civil construction, bridge cranes, and operation and maintenance activities proved viable. Container manufacturing, solar PV plants, and railway station construction contracts are being executed," he said. Diversification holds the key to Braithwaite's planned roadmap to become a Rs 2,500 crore listed CPSU by 2025-26. *—PTI*

Hybrid mutual funds attract ₹20cr in Jan

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Hybrid mutual fund schemes have been gaining popularity among investors, attracting Rs 20,634 crore in January, marking a 37 per cent surge from the previous month, largely due to their appeal as an alternative investment option post-change in taxation laws for debt funds.With this, total inflow in the category reached Rs 1.21 lakh crore in the April-January period of the current financial year (FY24).However, hybrid schemes saw outflow in the same period of the preceding financial year. Hybrid funds are mutual fund schemes that typically invest in a combination of equity and debt securities and sometimes in other asset categories such as gold.The category has been attracting regular inflows since April 2023, after a change in taxation for debt funds that kicked off in the same month. Before that, the segment saw a net withdrawal of Rs 12,372 crore in March last year. According to the latest data with the Association of Mutual Funds in India (Amfi), hybrid schemes witnessed an inflow of Rs 20,637 crore in January, which was higher than Rs 15,009 crore inflow seen in December. *—PTI*

7 cities see 8% rise in completion of housing units

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

India's seven major cities witnessed an annual 8 per cent rise in the completion of housing units last year at 4.35 lakh units as developers' cash flows improved on better sales, according to Anarock.In Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), 1,43,500 housing units were completed last year, up 13 per cent from 1,26,720 units in the previous year.The completion of housing units in Delhi-NCR rose 32 per cent to 1,14,280 units, as against 86,300 units in 2022.With housing demand remaining high, developers are prioritizing project completions. Among other cities, the completion of homes in Pune declined 23 per cent to 65,000 units in 2023, from 84,200 units in 2022. Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Chennai collectively saw 87,190 units completed in 2023, as against 81,580 units in 2022.In Kolkata, 25,075 units were completed in 2023, as against 23,190 units in 2022. Proptech firm Reloy Founder and CEO AkhilSaraf said the housing market is gradually becoming more organised after the passage of realty law RERA.Real estate developers are focusing a lot on customer relationship management and project executions, said Saraf.*—PTI*

'Action on Paytm has drawn attention to compliance of laws'

Union min says regulatory compliance cannot be 'optional' for firms

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Reserve Bank's regulatory action on Paytm Payments Bank has drawn the attention of fintech firms to the importance of complying with laws, Union Minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar has said.

He stressed that regulatory compliance cannot be "optional" for companies, rather it is an aspect every entrepreneur must pay full attention to.

In an interview, Chandrasekhar - the minister of state for electronics and IT - said the issue of Paytm Payments Bank is a case where a hard-charging and aggressive entrepreneur has failed to realise the need for regulatory compliance, and that no company can get away if it is non-compliant with law.

Any company, be it from India or abroad, big or small, has to abide by the law of the land, the Minister asserted amid the unfolding Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL) crisis.

Union Minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar *PHOTO: PTI*

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has barred PPBL from accepting new deposits from 15 March, and ruled out any review of its action against the company.

Chandrasekhar said the notion that RBI action on PPBL had rattled fintechs, was not a correct characterisation. The politician, entrepreneur and technocrat disagreed that the Paytm Payments Bank issue had raised worries about detrimental consequences for the entire fintech industry.

- Chandrasekhar further said that entrepreneurs typically tend to get so sharply focused on what they're building, that at times, they may lose sight of rules that have been laid down by regulators

Chandrasekhar further said that entrepreneurs typically tend to get so sharply focused on what they're building, that at times, they may lose sight of rules that have been laid down by regulators.

PPBL is an associate of One97 Communications Limited.

One97 Communications holds 49 per cent of the paid-up share capital (directly and through its subsidiary) of PPBL. Paytm Founder and CEO Vijay Shekhar Sharma has a 51 per cent stake in the bank.

Fintech firm One97 Communications -- owner of the brand Paytm -- meanwhile said it has shifted its nodal account to Axis Bank from Paytm Payments Bank - a move that will allow continuity of Paytm QR, Soundbox, card machine after the 15 March, deadline set by the central bank. The nodal account of Paytm is like a master account in which all its customers, merchant transactions are settled.

In the FinTech space, the regulator who lays down the rules is the RBI. So, you have to listen to the RBI and you have to comply with the RBI," the minister said.

—PTI

Mcap of six most valued firms plunge by ₹71,414cr; LIC and TCS biggest laggards

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The combined market valuation of six of the top 10 most valued firms eroded by Rs 71,414 crore last week, with state-owned company LIC emerged as the biggest laggard. Of the top-10 most valued firms, Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), ITC, Hindustan Unilever, Bharti Airtel and Reliance Industries faced a total erosion of Rs 71,414.03 crore.

On the other hand, State Bank of India, Infosys, HDFC Bank, and ICICI Bank emerged as the gainers. They collectively added Rs 62,038.86 crore. However, last week, the BSE benchmark climbed 831.15 points or 1.16 percent.

The market valuation of state-owned insurer LIC fell by Rs 26,217.12 crore to Rs 6,57,420.26 crore. TCS's market valuation tumbled by Rs 18,762.61 crore to Rs 14,93,980.70 crore.

State Bank of India, Infosys, HDFC Bank, and ICICI Bank emerged as the gainers *PHOTO: PTI*

- The market valuation of state-owned insurer LIC fell by Rs 26,217.12 crore to Rs 6,57,420.26 crore

The market capitalisation of ITC eroded by Rs 13,539.84 crore to Rs 5,05,092.18 crore, while that of Hindustan Unilever diminished by Rs 11,548.24 crore to Rs 5,58,039.67 crore. The market valuation of Bharti Airtel declined Rs 703.60 crore to Rs 6,30,340.9 crore, and that of Reliance Industries dipped by Rs 642.62 crore to Rs 19,76,493.92 crore.

Reliance Industries on Wednesday became the first Indian company to achieve a market capitalisation of Rs 20 lakh crore. The company's shares hit their 52-week high of Rs 2,968.40 apiece. Reliance stock had briefly touched Rs 20 lakh crore market capitalisation (m-cap) on Tuesday, but it ended the day at Rs 19.93 lakh crore.

—PTI

Adani-Total Gas betting on liquified natural gas

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

With quicker adoption of liquified natural gas (LNG) becoming a centre point in government's gas policy and to control greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, leading city gas distributor (CGD) Adani Total Gas Ltd has identified this superchilled fuel to fuel its growth.

Adani Total Gas Ltd (ATGL) is aiming to increase the adoption of LNG as the primary fuel for long-haul commercial vehicles, replacing diesel. This includes strategic tie-ups with various stakeholders like auto ancillaries, Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs), fleet operators, end-use industry, and retrofitment players to advocate for quicker adoption of the fuel."The biggest challenge of LNG is distribution. Currently we have only a handful of LNG dispensing stations and hence it is a chicken and egg situation. Fleet operators are unwilling to invest in switching over till the distribution network comes up, and till the demand builds up, oil marketing companies (OMCs) are not expanding the number of LNG outlets.

PHOTO: PTI

"To address this, we are engaging with all stakeholders in the ecosystem for a quicker adoption of this green fuel," said Suresh P Manglani, CEO, ATGL.Over the last two months, ATGL has signed MoUs with alternative fuel system manufacturer Shigan, cryogenic liquid storage, distribution and re-gas solutions provider INOX CVA, and Adani Cement, which engages a large number of fleets for logistics. The first LNG station is expected to be commissioned at Dahej in Gujarat by the first quarter of the next financial year.

50 million tonnes of diesel is consumed by the medium and heavy commercial vehicle (M&HCV) segment. *—PTI*

Two-wheeler sector to see revenue growth

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Domestic two-wheeler industry is expected to witness double-digit revenue growth next fiscal with demand for premium models anticipated to gain further momentum, according to Hero MotoCorp CEO Niranjan Gupta.

Country's largest two-wheeler maker, which reported a total income of Rs 10,031 crore in the October-December quarter this fiscal, also expects the entry-level segment to do better going ahead.

"As far as the demand is concerned, as we have been saying, we do expect the industry to grow double digit on revenue in the coming year at the least," Gupta said in an analyst call. He noted that in the domestic two-wheeler space there is a shift taking place towards premiumisation with buyers looking for feature-rich trims.

PHOTO: PTI

Gupta stated that the entry level bike vertical, which has seen muted sales over the last few years, is also on a recovery path. "So, it's not just about the top end of India which is growing, you can see aspirations of people growing," Gupta stated.

He noted that demand in the rural areas has improved considerably. The company has also launched a new model Mavrick 440 with deliveries expected to commence in April.

— PTI

Commerce Ministry decides to extend RoDTEP scheme benefits

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Commerce ministry has decided to extend export benefits under the RoDTEP scheme for companies in the special economic zones (SEZs) and export-oriented units (EOUs). This decision was communicated to the Director General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) on Friday.

The DGFT may issue a formal notification soon amending the foreign trade policy on the same. "Post rolling out of ICEGATE (Indian Customs Electronic Data Interchange Gateway) in SEZs, the RoDTEP scheme may also be extended to SEZs," according to an office memorandum of the commerce ministry.

Government in August 2021, announced the rates of tax refunds under the export promotion scheme

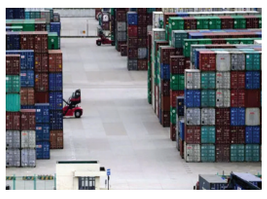


PHOTO: PTI

-- Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (RoDTEP), for 8,555 products such as marine goods, yarn and dairy items. As SEZs and EOUs were kept out of the scheme in the list notified at that time, the industry was demanding to include them in the scheme.

Under RoDTEP, various central and state duties, taxes, and levies imposed on input products, among others, are refunded to exporters. The current RoDTEP rates are in the range of 0.3 percent to 4.3 percent. *—PTI*

Power consumption grows 7.5% during Apr-Jan, FY 2022-23

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

India's power consumption increased 7.5 percent on-year to 1354.97 billion units (BU) in the April-January period of this financial year, indicating an uptick in economic activities across the country.

Power consumption in the country has increased to 1354.97 billion units (BU) in the April-January period of this financial year, from 1259.49 BU in the April-January period of fiscal 2022-23, according to government data.

It was 1505.91 BU in the entire fiscal year of 2022-23, the data showed. Experts believe the 7.5 percent growth in power consumption in the country clearly shows a perk up in economic activities in the first 10 months of this fiscal year. *—PTI*

SPIKE IN US BOND YIELDS

The move came following a net withdrawal of Rs 25,743 crore in January *PHOTO: X*

FPIs cautious on equities; take out ₹3.7cr in Feb

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Foreign investors adopted a cautious approach offloading Indian equities worth close to Rs 3,776 crore so far this month owing to a spike in the US bond yields and uncertainty over the interest rate environment on the domestic as well as the global front.

In contrast, they are bullish on the debt market and injected Rs 16,560 crore during the period under review, data with the depositories showed.

According to the data, Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) pulled out a net sum of Rs 3,776 crore from Indian equities this month (till 16 February). This came following a net withdrawal of Rs 25,743 crore in January. With this, the total outflow for this year has reached Rs 29,519 crore.

"The spike in US bond yields triggered by the higher-than-expected consumer price inflation led to sustained selling by FPIs," VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said. Also, the latest selling could be attributed to the uncertainty surrounding the interest rate environment, both domestically as well as globally, Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director Manager Research, Morningstar Investment Research India, said.

According to Vijayakumar, the selling by FPIs in equity would have been much higher in response to the rising US bond yields. But FPIs have been consistently losing the tug of war with DIIs and, therefore, they are a bit reluctant to press aggressive selling. They will have to buy the same stocks later, which they have been selling, when conditions are favourable for buying.

In September 2023, JP Morgan Chase & Co announced that it will add Indian government bonds to its benchmark emerging market index from June 2024. The move influenced the inflow in the country's bond markets in the past few months. The flow in Indian equities came following a worst net outflow of Rs 1.21 lakh crore in 2022 on aggressive rate hikes by the central banks globally. Before the outflow, FPIs invested money in the last three years. *—PTI*

BCAS has been monitoring the arrival of baggage at six major airports in January 2024 *PHOTO: PTI*

Airlines told to deliver baggage within 30 mins

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

An official statement on Sunday said that BCAS has asked the airlines to implement the required measures to ensure timely delivery of baggage by 26 February.

BCAS has been monitoring the arrival of baggage at belts of six major airports in January 2024 under the instructions of Civil Aviation Minister JyotiradityaScindia.

BCAS has been monitoring the arrival of baggage at belts of six major airports in January 2024 under the instructions of Civil Aviation Minister JyotiradityaScindia. Regulator BCAS has directed airlines to ensure that all baggage of passengers are delivered within 30 minutes of landing of a flight at an airport. The directive from the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) to seven scheduled airlines also comes against the backdrop of delays in passengers getting their baggage after landing of a flight.An official statement said that BCAS has asked the airlines to implement the required measures to ensure timely delivery of baggage by February 26.

The directive was issued on February 16 to seven airlines -- Air India, IndiGo, Akasa Air, SpiceJet, Vistara, AIX Connect, and Air India Express.

Airlines have to ensure that delivery of the last baggage is made within 30 minutes as per the Service Quality Requirements of Operation, Management and Delivery Agreement (OMDA). BCAS has been monitoring the arrival of baggage at belts of six major airports in January 2024 under the instructions of Civil Aviation Minister JyotiradityaScindia.

"Since the beginning of the review exercise, performance of all airlines are being monitored on a weekly basis and have improved but are not as per the mandates. "The mandates require the first baggage to arrive at the baggage belt within 10 minutes of shutting off the aircraft engine and the last bag within 30 minutes of the same," the statement said. *—PTI*

ON AI-GENERATED CONTENT

Tech companies using content without consent: Publishers' body

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The International Publishers' Association (IPA) President Karine Pansa accused big technology companies of using copyrighted content "without permission" for AI-generated materials and urged publishers to raise their concerns.

Pansa, who recently visited India for the ongoing New Delhi World Book Fair, said the IPA is holding discussions with its member countries, including India, on how to deal with the big tech companies for infringing publishers' copyrights by "reproducing their materials without permission" for AI training.

"The big tech companies are using the content available on the internet to regenerate the new content without consent, and part of this content is books, the content of which belongs to the publishers. It is being used without their permission, consent, licensed payment, and remuneration.

IPA, founded in 1896 in Paris with the promotion and defence of copyright and the freedom to publish, is the world's largest federation of national, regional and specialist publishers' associations.

Based in Geneva, Switzerland, the organisation comprises 100 plus members from 81 countries.

Terming the alleged copyright infringement by the big tech companies -- including Microsoft, Meta and OpenAI -- a serious matter, Pansa said it is sad that not many people, even those belonging to the publishing industry, are aware of the unfair use of the authors' copyrighted works.

Karine Pansa *PHOTO: X*

She encouraged publishers to come forward and raise their concerns, ensuring IPA's full support.

- Terming the alleged copyright infringement by the big tech companies -- a serious matter, Pansa said it is sad that not many people, are aware of the unfair use of the authors' copyrighted works

"We need to make sure that the publishers also value their own work, because sometimes they don't.

Globally, several groups of authors, including the likes of novelist John Grisham and "Game of Thrones" author George RR Martin, have filed lawsuits over the use of their text in AI training.

Brazilian publisher argued against amending copyright laws and said the current set of rules are well-equipped to hold the big tech companies accountable for the violation.

When asked about concerns regarding writers' running out of jobs because of the advent of AI, she replied: "AI is not creative enough, it is just recombination of used patterns and data at best".

"We are not asking to end GPT. We all should embrace technology, and authors today are using it, maybe to correct their draft or to make sure that they have the right words. But the main idea, the original creation, is theirs," she concluded. *—PTI*

Jaiswal, Jadeja shine as India beat England

India annihilate England by 434 runs, their biggest-ever Test win, taking a 2-1 lead

RAJKOT, 18 FEB

Yashasvi Jaiswal's sensational double hundred found harmonious co-existence with the stunning craftiness of five-wicket man Ravindra Jadeja as ruthless India demolished wasteful England by a record 434 runs on the fourth day of the third Test here on Sunday.

England resisted their desire to play 'Bazball' but the Indian bowlers led by Jadeja (5/41) were an irresistible force, as they hustled out the tourists for 122 in their second innings while chasing an improbable 557-run target.

India, now, leads the five-match series 2-1.This was also India's biggest win in Test cricket in terms of runs, bettering the previous 372-run win over New Zealand at the Wankhede Stadium in 2021.

Jaiswal's unbeaten 214 off 236 balls, in which he equaled the highest number of sixes (12) in a Test inning, was the cornerstone of India's second innings total of 430 for four declared, which gave them a massive lead of 556 runs earlier in the day.It was also a perfect platform for Jadeja to weave his magic as England's claims of fancying themselves in big chases through an aggressive approach came to nothing.

India's plan of attacking the wickets took the wind away from the sails of England, whose top order crumbled without any significant contribution.With Jadeja finding ample support from Kuldeep Yadav (2/19), Jasprit Bumrah (1/18) and Ravichandran Ashwin (1/19), who rejoined the match on this day after attending a medical emergency at home, England found no way out. Ben Duckett (4) ran himself out, Zak Crawley (11) was trapped leg-before by Bumrah and Jadeja struck twice in quick succession to see the back of Ollie Pope (3) and extended Jonny Bairstow's (4) misery on this tour.

After a brief period of resistance, Joe Root (7) missed a sweep with the umpire declaring him out leg-before off Jadeja, and the replays confirmed that the ball would have flicked the top of the off-stump. Captain Ben Stokes (15) had a similar fate, missing a sweep off Kuldeep Yadav as England slumped to 50 for six.

But before Jadeja and his horsemen of apocalypse ran through England, Jaiswal and debutant Sarfaraz Khan showcased their brilliance in no little measure.Shubman Gill too displayed his class with a 91 after India resumed the fourth day from 196 for two.

The knock combined with his hundred in the previous Test might have brought him considerable time and confidence.But none shone as bright as Jaiswal. India 445 (Rohit 131, Jadeja 112, Sarfaraz 62, Wood 4-114) and 430 for 4 dec (Jaiswal 214*, Gill 91, Sarfaraz 68*) beat England 319 (Duckett 153, Siraj 4-84) and 122 (Wood 33, Jadeja 5-41) by 434 runs. —*PTI*

India's Ravindra Jadeja kneels to kiss the pitch after taking the match-winning wicket of England's Mark Wood ***PHOTO: PTI***

Indian team celebrates after second test against England, at the Niranjan Shah Stadium, in Rajkot ***PHOTO: PTI***

Sarfaraz Khan ***PHOTO: PTI***

YASHASVI JAISWAL MAKES HISTORY

RAJKOT, 18 FEB

Yashasvi Jaiswal historic double century: A superstar in the making, India's Yashasvi Jaiswal scored his second double century of the Test career, as Rohit Sharma's men took on England in the third Test of the series at Rajkot. Jaiswal came out to bat as an opener on Day 3 but retired soon after reaching his century. He returned to the pitch after Shubman Gill's dismissal on Day 4 and raced to his second double hundred of the Test career. En route to his double ton, Jaiswal matched the record of hitting the most number of sixes in a Test innings (12), equalling Wasim Akram's record. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Ashwin to join last two days of 3rd Test: BCCI

RAJKOT, 18 FEB

Senior India off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin will be back in action and compete in the remainder of the third Test against England, the BCCI confirmed on Sunday. Ashwin was forced to leave for Chennai to attend to his ailing mother, hours after reaching the coveted milestone of 500 Test wickets on the second day of the match.

"The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) is pleased to announce the return of Ravichandran Ashwin to the squad after a brief absence.—PTI

PHOTO: PTI

Dhoni is skipper of IPL's all-time greatest team

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Iconic Indian cricketer Mahendra Singh Dhoni was on Sunday selected as the leader of IPL's all-time greatest team which was picked to celebrate the success of the world's most-popular T20 league which was launched in 2008.The selection panel consisted of former cricketers Wasim Akram, Matthew Hayden, Tom Moody, and Dale Steyn. About 70 journalists were also part of the selection process.Australia's fiery David Warner and India's batting mainstay Virat Kohli were chosen as openers while 'Universe Boss' Chris Gayle was given the number three spot in the batting order.—*PTI*

23-member squad for Turkish Women's Cup

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The AIFF on Sunday announced a 23-member women's senior team to compete in the Turkish Women's Cup 2024 in Alanya from 21 to 27 February.The team will leave for Turkey on Monday for the tournament in which India participated twice in 2019 and 2021.AIFF Acting Secretary General M. Satyanarayan said, "Our Senior Women's National Team is going to play for the first time after the Olympic Qualifiers, which makes the Turkish Women's Cup an important tournament for us.The players have had a week-long preparation (camp in Bengaluru).—*PTI*

Batra stars in India's win over Hungary at WC

BUSAN, 18 FEB

Manika Batra won both her singles matches as the Indian women's team edged out Hungary 3-2 for its first win of the World Table Tennis Championships here on Sunday.

However, the Indian men's team suffered a 1-3 loss to Poland in its second group game.

Manika, who is India's top-ranked player at 36, had to dig deep against Dora Madaras in the opening singles before pulling off an 8-11, 11-5, 12-10, 8-11, 11-4 win on Sunday.

Georgina Pota then leveled the tie with an 11-3, 11-7, 9-11, 9-11, 11-8 result over Sreeja Akula in the second singles. Sreeja had stunned world number 2 Wang Yidi in the tournament opener.

Ayhika Mukherkjee, the conqueror of world number one Sun Yinghsa on Friday, put India 2-1 up with a 7-11, 11-6, 11-7, 11-8 win over Bernadett Balint.

The contest was stretched into the decider when Madaras got past Sreeja 11-4, 11-6, 5-11, 11-7 in the fourth singles.

Manika kept her composure in the all-important decider against Pota to complete an 11-5, 14-12, 13-11 win. India will play Spain and Uzbekistan in the remaining group games. With three wins in as many games, China is expected to top the group.

In the men's tie, Harmeet Desai was the only one to put it past Poland as he defeated Macie Kubik 12-10, 13-11, 9-11, 11-5 in the second singles.

Sharath Kamal and Manav Thakkar lost their respective singles. Harmeet returned to play the fourth singles but couldn't get the job done against Jakub Dyjas 7-11, 7-11, 11-8, 12-14.

—*AP*

Manika Batra ***PHOTO: PTI***

Rohit Sharma ***PHOTO:PTI***

India can win Tests on any pitch: Rohit

RAJKOT, 18 FEB

Skipper Rohit Sharma stressed the Indianteam's ability to win games on any surface including rank turners, followingits record 434-run win over England on a flat track here on Sunday.

India set a target of 557 runs for England on a placid pitch withmore than four sessions left in the game.

However, the visitors folded inside40 overs for 122 to give India a 2-1 lead in the series.

"We have won a lot of matches on such wickets before.

—*PTI*

Vysakh, Srinivas 100s power Karnataka over Chandigarh

HUBLI, 18 FEB

Sharath Srinivas and Vysakh Vijaykumar notched up stroke-filled unbeaten hundreds as Karnataka placed themselves in a prime position to push for an outright win against Chandigarh on the third day of their Ranji Trophy Group C match here on Sunday.

Wicketkeeper batter Srinivas (100, 160b, 11x4) and Vysakh (103, 141b, 10x4, 2x6) stitched together 198 runs for the sixth wicket stand as Karnataka declared their first innings at 563 for five.

It gave the home side a lead of 296 runs and at close Chandigarh reached 61 for no loss.

Karnataka started the day at 268 for three, ahead by just one run with veteran batter Manish Pandey, overnight 102, having young Hardik Raj (49) for company. They batted with purpose as Pandey motored to 148 and Hardik reached 82. But their 239-run association for the fourth wicket ended when Hardik succumbed to left-arm spinner Karan Kalia, the most successful Chandigarh bowler (3/143). Karnataka were 354 for 4 then.Kalia trapped Pandey's leg 11 runs later but the hosts found two more willing soldiers in Srinivas and Vysakh as both of them went on to make their maiden First-Class hundreds.

Karnataka are now second in Group C with 24 points behind Gujarat (25 points) and they will be looking for an outright win to top the group.

As things stand now, Karnataka can finish the group engagements with 27 points by their first innings lead. But an outright win, if it is by innings, will swell their tally to 31.

At Salem, Tamil Nadu is battling for a quarterfinal berth against Punjab. TN have 22 points and they have taken the first-innings lead over Punjab.

If the match ends in a draw TN will have 25 points, the same as Gujarat, but they can go through to knockouts after logging a better Net Run Rate of 1.78 as against the Western side's 1.11. —*PTI*

Vysakh Vijaykumar ***PHOTO: PTI***

Sharath Srinivas ***PHOTO: PTI***

Rodri equalizes after Haaland misses big chances

LONDON, 18 FEB

Haaland ***PHOTO: AFP***

Manchester City were held to a 1-1 draw by Chelsea at the Etihad Stadium, a setback in their efforts to retain the Premier League title following wins for Liverpool and Arsenal earlier in the day.City had most of the play in the early stages, but the visitors were a clear threat on the counter-attack, forcing Ederson into early saves. Erling Haaland also missed the first of several good chances that he failed to take, uncharacteristically, and the home side were made to pay when Raheem Sterling finished a Chelsea break to put them ahead with a curling shot.City continued to lay siege to the Chelsea goal in the second half, without getting enough shots on target. Finally, Rodri's deflected shot brought City level with a few minutes remaining, but they weren't able to grab the winner in injury time and had to settle for a point which left them in third place in the table.

—*AP*

Napolitano wards off Hong to clinch Bengaluru Open

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Stefano Napolitano showed wonderful persistence to ward off ninth seed Seongchan Hong of South Korea in the final to grab his maiden Challenger title at the Bengaluru Open here on Sunday.

The seventh-seeded Italian won 4-6, 6-3, 6-3 in a match that lasted close to two hours.

Napolitano started the opening set on a sluggish note as all the exhaustion from beating second-seeded Indian Sumit Nagal in a grueling semifinal match on Saturday seemed to have caught up with him.

Though he cashed in on a couple of unforced errors from Hong to bag a break in the first game of the opening set, Napolitano could not hold his serve in the second game.

In the fifth game, Hong affected the crucial break when Napolitano slammed a heavy forehand from his rival into the net.

The Korean man soon successfully closed out the first set 6-4.

But Napolitano returned to his elements in the second set as he regained the direction of his serves and ground shots.

His relentlessness came to fruition in the fourth game as he established a 0-40 lead and eventually earned the vital break when Hong's forehand sailed over the baseline.

It helped Napolitano gain a 3-1 lead and from that point the Italian did not allow any chance for his opponent to claw back, winning the second set 6-3.

The third set was a mirror image of its predecessor. Napolitano gained a break in the first game itself. After engaging in a long rally at 30-40, Napolitano hammered a forehand that pitched close to the baseline, and Hong failed to connect it properly as the ball flew into the stands.

Having gained an early 1-0 lead, Napolitano dictated the whole proceedings of the decider dishing out solid service games. Another easy hold in the eighth game gave the 28-year-old a comfortable 5-3 lead and the fight seemed to have ebbed out of Hong.

Napolitano crunched a couple of exquisite forehand winners to go up 0-40 and then applied the finishing touch to the match with a heavy backhand that Hong failed to retrieve.

Result (Singles, final): 7-Stefano Napolitano beat 9- Seongchan Hong 4-6, 6-3, 6-3. —*PTI*

Napolitano with the big prize ***PHOTO: TWITTER BANGALURU TENNIS OPEN***

India women defeat USA via shootout

ROURKELA, 18 FEB

A day after upsetting world No.3 Australia, India women once again played an entertaining and fast-paced brand of hockey to defeat the United States 2-1 via shootout in an FIH Pro League match here on Sunday.

Mumtaz Khan and Sonika were on target in the shootout, while Leah Crouse scored for the losing team.

Despite the win, the Indian chief coach, Janneke Schopman, was unhappy with the way the Savita Punia-led side. —*PTI*

PREMIER LEAGUE

Brighton moves up to 7th after a 5-0 win

ROME, 18 FEB

Brighton moved up to seventh in the Premier League table with a comprehensive 5-0 win over Sheffield United at Bramall Lane.

The task for the visitors was made easier when the hosts were reduced to 10 men after just 13 minutes when Mason Holgate was shown a red card for a reckless tackle on Kaoru Mitoma.

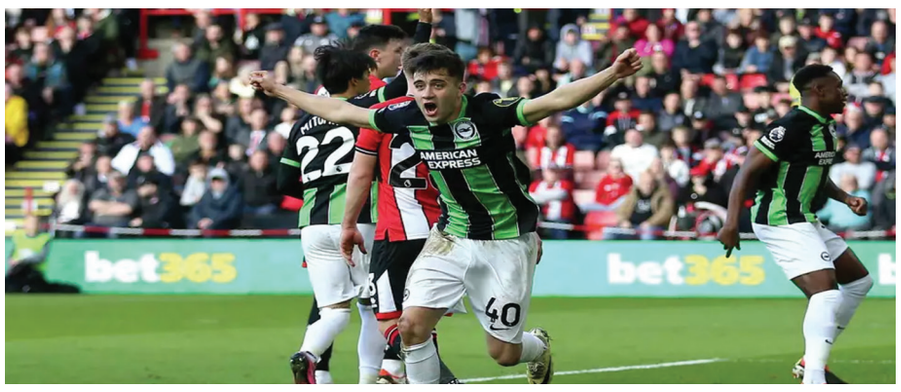
Brighton dominated thereafter, with the game played almost exclusively in the Sheffield United half.

Two quick goals after the sending-off, from Facundo Buonanotte and Danny Welbeck, put the result beyond doubt; an own goal from Jack Robinson and a brace from Simon Adringa in the final 20 minutes completed the rout.

Sheffield United remain on the bottom of the table and have now conceded more goals after 25 games than any team in Premier League history.

Brighton moved up to seventh after 5-0 win over Sheffield United at Bramall Lane.

—*AP*



Brighton's Facundo Buonanotte celebrates after scoring the opening goal ***PHOTO: AFP***

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Suspended PCI to conduct polls on 9 March

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The suspended Paralympic Committee of India (PCI) on Sunday announced that it will conduct its delayed polls on 9 March.

The Sports Ministry had on February 4 suspended the body for not holding the election on time. The four-year term of the PCI Executive Committee ended on 31 January.

The ministry had even advocated the forming of an ad-hoc panel to run the day-to-day affairs of the sports body but the world governing body of the game, IPC did not allow it.

—*PTI*